THE

WOMAN I LOVED,

AND THE

WOMAN WHO LOVED ME.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"AGNES TREMARNE," "THE COST OF A SECRET,"
"A STORY OF TWO LIVES," &c., &c.

Novels

"She was not pretty, many said,
To me she was far more—
One of those women, women dread,
Men, fatally adore!"

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CHAPTER I.

THE WOMAN I LOVED—MARIAN.

My mother was very anxious that I should marry. This was not an extraordinary wish,—I was an only son. With me, if I died unmarried, would perish the ancient line of the Spencers of Speynings. Speynings itself would pass to another branch of the family who bore another name. There would be no more Spencers of Speynings, but Hursts of Speynings. The alliteration would be destroyed, and the charm broken. From the time I was at college the necessity which imposed marriage on me had been dinned into my ears.

Entire freedom of choice was granted me within the following limits. My bride must be well educated, well principled, and well born. If she were rich it was well, but wealth was not indispensable.

To fulfil this laudable purpose, my mother carefully and successively invited all the eligible young ladies of the neighbourhood to stay at Speynings, on long periodical visits during my vacations. She then declared that a ward of hers who lived with us, was in want of a companion in her rides and drives and walks. It was natural, she said, that Fanny Egerton should require more lively associates than an old woman like herself. My mother did not do herself justice. In the first place, she was not an old woman; in the next, as Fanny confided to me, she was far more agreeable to talk to than any girl in the neighbourhood. However, Fanny had sufficient tact not to appear perverse. She allowed it to be supposed that sharing her daily drive, for a week at a time, with blue-eyed Laura Conyers was pleasant, though Laura was more dull than a fashionable novel; she played duets with exemplary patience with Emma Danvers, who was

music mad; and she would ride for hours with Nora Compton, who was a Di Vernon as regards equestrian exploits. Poor Fanny! she would willingly have exchanged the society of these damsels in their most mirthful moods to have had one half-hour's conversation with my mother—and she was right. It was the most pleasant companionship in the world. Unlike most elderly women, my mother had retained a liveliness of imagination, a buoyancy of temper, a youth of heart, that neither age, delicate health, nor a life chequered by many trials could dim or chill. In all the essential attributes of youth she was young.

I have often thought that my disinclination to marry, the imperviousness with which I bore feminine attacks on my peace, were to be attributed to the charms of my home. Fanny's liveliness, my mother's tender and sympathetic indulgence, gave life a sweetness at Speynings which left me nothing to wish for.

I had travelled on the continent; I had seen the most beautiful women in Paris, Vienna, and Rome. I had been in love, as in duty bound, at each place, but none of these inclinations had led me to take the inevitable step. No woman had

inspired me with that feeling which is, I think, inseparable from a real love, the yearning for a home shared with the woman one loves. I never longed to see Leonie de Fierville's face at breakfast, and I never returned from a long mountain expedition while I was in Italy with any wish that on my return, I could see the smile of Fiamma Altoviti illuminating my hearth. As to Adelheid Falkenstein, I always drew my breath more freely out of her imperial and exacting presence, though I was such an adoring slave while in it.

Nor did I, that pleasant morning, after my two years' travels, when I came down to breakfast, and saw my mother's eyes sparkle as I entered, and heard Fanny's joyous voice bid me good morning, retain the faintest recollection of Leonie's bright eyes, the faultless profile of Fiamma, or the Zenobia bearing of Adelheid.

Fanny was in her riding-habit, and I could not help smiling when I found, in the course of conversation, that she was going to invite Nora Compton to spend a few days with us. It was too early, I thought, to interrupt our peaceful home circle; nevertheless I offered to accompany

her, and immediately afterwards the horses were brought round, and we mounted.

"I cannot understand, Fanny," said I, as we rode along, "why my mother thinks it necessary to spoil our comfortable trio by the admission of anyone else. Surely you have no pleasure in talking to a rough, noisy girl like Nora."

"A certain degree of pleasure, for I like her; but I should not wish to invite her for my own sake, but your mother wishes it, and that is enough for me. Besides, I sometimes think I am too much for her; she is so very delicate, Hubert; more so than formerly—have you not noticed it?"

My heart sunk; I *had* observed it, but attributed the paler cheek, the slighter figure, to the inevitable progress of time, not to any increase of illness.

Fanny saw I was moved, and changed the conversation.

"Do you think Nora handsome?"

"Handsome?"

"Surely she is handsome with those beautiful features and complexion, and that smooth black hair folded round her head like black satin."

"Possibly," I said, indifferently; "suppose we canter now."

We arrived. I remember as I walked through the hall my spur caught against a child's toy which had been carelessly left there, and I nearly fell.

"I am sorry," exclaimed Fanny, "for I see by this toy Mrs. Villars is arrived."

I did not ask her to explain this speech, for at this moment we entered the drawing-room.

Mrs. Villars was the eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Compton. She was a widow. She had been married before I went to college, and had been a widow two years. I had never seen her.

We entered the room. By the window sat a lady; she had a child on her knee, and was stooping down over him, showing him a picture book; her fair wavy hair fell so low down on her cheek I could not distinguish her features, but the outline of the bending figure was grace itself. Such undulating willowy lines are seldom seen in an English figure.

The next moment Nora rushed in, and introduced me to her sister, Mrs. Villars. The lady looked up and bowed. What a lovely face! The

eyes were large and bright, violet-coloured, with brown eyelashes; the mouth was rather wide, but very red, and set in curves of arch and "*folâtre*" meaning; the cheek was dimpled and rounded like a young girl's; but the brow was thoughtful, and under the eye were lines which showed that girlhood was put away, and that a woman's cares had commenced.

While Nora laughed and talked to Fanny, who was somewhat absent and fidgety, so at least it seemed to me, I had full leisure to contemplate the enchanting picture before me. The child so effectually occupied its mother, that she could not speak to anyone else, and it was best for me that it was so. How could I have talked at such a moment?

It seems cynical to remark it, but I have observed that a pretty woman is never so kind and complaisant to her child as before strangers. Not, as may be vulgarly imagined, to exalt their opinion of her maternal love; but that a winsome form never takes such lithe attitudes as in the tender caresses and struggles, half play and half affection, which take place on such occasions. A romping child rumples the hair, and displays most unconsciously its bright waving luxuriance,

or drags up a sleeve and exhibits a round white arm, or (profane imp) nestles in a throat which is white as a swan's; and all these accidents add much to the impression made by a beautiful woman.

Mrs. Villars was quite aware of these advantages, and failed not to make use of them. Only for a short time, however. The child was tenderly caressed, and then dismissed. She turned to me.

"Those young ladies seem to have so much to converse about, Mr. Spencer, that perhaps you will have time to walk with me round the garden. I will show you the improvements."

She took up carelessly a veil of black lace which was on the table, threw it lightly over her head, and passed out through the verandah into the garden.

Heavens! how beautiful she was! How much more lovely is the beauty of some women than that of others. Fanny was remarkably pretty, a fair Saxon-looking girl; Nora's face and figure were celebrated: what was it that gave Mrs. Villars, whose features were more irregular, whose complexion was far less youthful, her peerless

and transcendant beauty? They might please, she charmed. Long study and natural grace gave her manners and appearance the most exquisite softness. To this was added a low musical voice, sufficient intelligence to know exactly what to say and what to leave unsaid, and more tact than I have ever seen in any other woman. It was this which attracted all who came within reach of her influence. Nature had endowed her with that organisation, at once flexible and strong, which is supposed to belong peculiarly to the feline race, and with it she had the same sportive and graceful pliancy. Her head was low and broad; phrenologists would have pronounced it of that shape which gives most scope to the organs of caution and acquisitiveness, but it was not depressed at the temples; the sympathetic and perceptive part of our faculties was well though less powerfully represented. This is the type which from time immemorial belongs to the women who enchant men. The Lamia type. But this is a digression.

I walked with Mrs. Villars in the garden: she pointed out to me the changes and improvements in the gardens and shrubberies of the Grange, and floated rather than trod through the green

enclosures, and over the raised lawn. Her little boy, who had come down again, fluttered by us; I heard the merry laughter of the two girls in the drawing-room; there was something unutterably fragrant in the flowers, and it seemed to me as if a bit of Paradise had fallen from the skies into this lonely squire's house in Devonshire. She spoke, but I was monosyllabic in my answers. I could enjoy, but could not speak. At last Fanny ran out. Her quick step grated on my ears.

"I have ordered the horses, Hubert," she said; "I cannot stay longer."

"When does Miss Compton come?"

"Not yet, she says——"

"Do not let her delay her visit on my account," said Mrs. Villars, in her rich melancholy voice. "Mamma and I will take care of each other."

"No, another time will do just as well."

Fanny shook hands with Mrs. Villars, and bade her adieu. I noticed there was something aggressive in the manner of both. I had a sort of desperate feeling that I could not say good-by without leaving some door open, making some opportunity by means of which I could return

sooner than it would have been otherwise decorous to do. How wildly my thoughts flew from point to point as we advanced to the horses, my very eagerness to effect my purpose confusing me and distracting me as to the choice of means. I stammered, I hesitated. I began a hundred sentences without finishing any. At last Mrs. Villars, as if she penetrated my wish, and kindly sought to gratify it, said:

"One of my first visits will be to Mrs. Spencer, but as it may be some days before I can go, will you ask her to send me the flower-seeds she promised me the last summer I was here?"

I could have fallen down, and kissed her feet. "I will bring them to-morrow," I said to myself, but I only bowed and took leave. I mounted Fanny, and then, as we rode slowly on through the park, turned back and caught a last glimpse of the floating white dress and of the black veil over the shining hair.

Fanny and I were silent as we rode home. She, poor child, had commenced talking, but finding her efforts at conversation entirely unavailing had desisted. I was grateful to her. I did not desire to break through the silence (filled

with enchanted reveries) in which I had wrapped myself away from the past and the present, and which, with a golden mist enveloped the future. When we reached Speynings, Fanny went at once into the house, but I loitered till dinner time among the terraces. It was late when I entered. The glorious vision which the air and sunshine had called forth had faded into the twilight.

I found my mother and Fanny together. My mother looked a little serious and a little disappointed.

"I am so sorry Nora cannot come," she said.

"Her visit is only delayed," I answered indifferently; "by-the-by, Mrs. Villars asked me to remind you of some flower-seeds you promised her."

"Yes, Fanny has told me: I will send them tomorrow to the Grange."

There was no more to be said. I had so established my reputation as a declared enemy to morning visits that I could not offer to take them. I was silent and thoughtful. When I looked up I found my mother's eyes fixed most earnestly on me.

My mother was not at all handsome. She

could not have been so even in her youthful days. Her eyes were the only remarkable—and by remarkable I do not mean beautiful—feature in her face. Neither in colour nor shape could they be called pretty. They were pale blue, and somewhat small, though bright, but the expression was peculiar. Usually they had a frank, intelligent expression, as innocent and confiding as the look of a tame bird; but at times they deepened into the most startling intentness. Stendahl tells us that in the East there is a tradition which refers to this singular power in the eyes. The Arabs say that when the angels walked the earth among the sons and daughters of men, they knew each other under their mortal garb by this peculiar glance.

Most women's eyes betray their sex, either by a veiled or a conscious look. My mother's eyes were sexless. They had not more softness than would have become a man's, they had not more fire than might have flashed from a woman's. At this moment they were prophetic.

People talk of the wonders of mesmerism, of spiritual manifestation through gifted mediums: what can be more wonderful than the intuitive

knowledge which we sometimes obtain of the feelings of another? I felt as certain as if she had spoken, that my mother did not like Mrs. Villars, and would disapprove of my cultivating an intimacy with her.

"Why do you not like Mrs. Villars?" I asked, pursuing my own thoughts, unconscious of the abruptness of my remark. It tallied, however, too much with her own secret thoughts to seem abrupt. Fanny blushed scarlet, my mother turned pale.

"Why should you think we dislike Mrs Villars?"

"Do you mean to say I am mistaken?"

"You have almost obtained second sight, if you can read my thoughts in that way. I will not say I dislike Mrs. Villars, for I scarcely know her. She left the Grange very young, when her parents went abroad, and returned twelve years afterwards a married woman. She visited her parents rarely, and this is the first time I have ever had the opportunity of seeing her. She arrived about six months ago. Yet by that free-masonry which reveals one woman to another, I should say she was a dangerous person."

"From her marvellous beauty?—I agree with you."

"Marvellous beauty!" exclaimed Fanny. "She has not a good feature in her face, except her eyes. She is not young, and looks absolutely plain sometimes."

My lips curled at this feminine jealousy.

"I think her looks variable," said my mother; "but I do not deny that she is at times wonderfully beautiful. But her beauty is dangerous, for she is artful, selfish, and cold-hearted. I should be sorry if any one I loved, loved her, for that love, under the happiest circumstances, would only lead to disappointment and misery."

"My dear mother," said I, taking her hand, "it is very well for Fanny to speak disparagingly of her friend's sister; it may proceed from a disinterested jealousy on her friend's account—but you?"

"Did you think I spoke from jealousy?" and something of scorn passed over her face. It was instantly checked, and with a caressing motion habitual to her, she passed her hand over my cheek, and said, tenderly, "My dearest, do not think me prejudiced; I am quite willing you

should judge for yourself. I will call on Mrs. Villars to-morrow."

I was so confident of my power, so certain that if it were in human possibility to grant me a wish my mother would have moved heaven and earth to do it, that I did not feel particularly flattered at my triumph. I was too much accustomed to her indulgence, and too much spoilt by it, not to take this proof—heaven knows I had daily and hourly proofs of it—with the most passive indifference. I left the room; I wished to be alone to distinguish what was in my heart. "I adore my mother," I thought, "and I love Fanny; but there is a point beyond which they cannot step. It is folly to think that after having seen Mrs. Villars once I can have other feelings for her but admiration, but that admiration belongs to an order of sensations over which no human being can have the least control. I have nothing to do with their measurement of her value, or they with my appreciation of her worth. I feel that she and I are in a region beyond their reach. I will never name her again." The very tenor of these reflections ought to have convinced me that I was entering a perilous path, but

I was unconscious of it—I was dazzled, besotted, blind.

Beloved as I was by my mother, few sons had actually lived so little with a parent. I had been taken abroad when a child, and sent to my father, who resided there. He had been separated from my mother soon after my birth.

There had been a great disparity in position between my parents. He was the second son of a second son of a good county family, and connected with the peerage. She was the daughter of a wealthy farmer. My father was staying in the neighbourhood of her home, studying with a private tutor. As I have said, she could never have been beautiful, or even pretty. She was tall, thin, fair, but her figure was ordinary, her face freckled. She possessed no luxuriance of bloom to deck out ordinary features, yet some great charm she must have possessed, for he fell desperately in love with her, and for that love braved the displeasure of his parents and married her. Both her friends and his, were equally displeased at the match. Her father, who had always been harsh and unkind to her, for no fault of hers, but that she was a girl instead of

a boy, disinherited her for this act, and for thus having abandoned her own sphere and her own people for a penniless sprig of nobility. His friends excommunicated him for having mixed the blue blood of the Spencers with this plebeian source, where there was not even the excuse of beauty to palliate his folly.

I remember my father well. He was very handsome; fine features, a dark, clear complexion, beautiful curly hair, patrician hands and feet, and manners which were perfection. But never did a more ornamented casket contain a more thorough bit of tinsel. It seems unfilial to say so, but this impression is indelible. With him my childhood was unhappy, my boyhood miserable, and the faults which have cursed my manhood are, I must believe, owing to his neglect. I was never the object of his care, or the subject of his discipline. My selfishness was encouraged by his, and his example fostered my weakness in right, and my obstinacy in wrong. If he did not "write like an angel, and talk like poor Poll," he talked as a man of the most exquisite sensibility, and acted with a hardness which was almost fabulous. I never could imagine what had at first attracted

him to my mother. I could understand her better; she was young, left to herself, and without a mother. Thrown into the society of a young man of great personal beauty, his refined manners, and apparently noble character, seemed the realised ideal of her fairest imaginations. She was well educated, and solitude had deepened and exalted her character. He saw the impression he had made, and at first had probably no other intention than to beguile the time which his father had obliged him to devote to study, but as is inevitable in the association of human beings, the stronger, truer character attained ascendancy over the feebler, false one. He had sufficient intelligence to see that this young woman possessed a truth and simplicity of disposition, a warmth of heart, and a magnamity of character which was as rare as it was precious. The great power of her love magnetised him, and for awhile his weak nature wore an aspect which seemed worthy of hers. They married, and were of course at once disowned by their relations.

At first they lived in obscure lodgings in London. Soon after marriage the two characters began to feel the wide gulf which existed between them. Adver-

sity is a great test. Selfishness, hardheartedness, and falsehood were mated to generosity, tenderness, and truth. Had the wife possessed a particle of artifice, she might perhaps have maintained for a short time longer her power over him, but she was totally devoid of it. She was frank to a fault. Her intelligence was keen enough to detect the hollowness of the love offered to her, and the recoil was proportionate to the love she had given. He said his home was wretched, and acted on this assertion by abandoning it, two months before my birth, in company with a French actress, with whom he went to Italy.

His uncle, on hearing this last *escapade* of his worthless nephew, came up to town to see the poor deserted young wife. He became, as all who knew her became, strongly attached to her, and furious against her husband. He was an eccentric but clever man, and understood that the *mésalliance* which had caused such a storm in his brother's family was, in fact, on the side of the noble affectionate heart which had given its pure gold for such vile metal.

He was the head of the Spencers, had married a rich heiress, and had no family. With the ex-

ception of Speynings, which he could not alienate, he had the power of leaving his property where he pleased. He and his wife took my mother home with them, and supplied to her the place of the husband who had deserted her and the father who had disinherited her. At his death he left all he was possessed of to her, with the exception of an annuity to my father, to be paid to him on condition of his never returning to England or claiming Speynings; and he made an arrangement with my grandfather to allow my mother to reside there, and to administer the estate in trust for me, but only to be my heritage after her death. She was free to marry again, should she become a widow, and even the bequest to me was limited to her pleasure. My uncle died when I was five years old. When my father heard of the will his rage knew no bounds, and his first act was an unpardonable one. Actuated by the most iniquitous spirit of revenge, and knowing how my mother was wrapped up in me, he sent for me. Law was on his side, and I was yielded up to him.

His next step was inspired by the same evil spirit, but the consequences were less fatal. The

French actress had long left him, and he had devoted his leisure time to painting, for which he had some talent. He was at Vienna when my uncle died. He immediately burnt his palette and brushes, and as the greatest mortification he could inflict upon the family who had so injured him, joined a house of business in Vienna. The name of Spencer was seen attached to two Jewish names, and figured among the Co. of a mercantile firm. His speculations were fortunate, and he became rich. He did not, however, long enjoy his wealth. He died when I was about fourteen. By his will I was not to inherit a farthing of his property till I was five-and-twenty. The money was not to be touched till then by me, or for my use, but reserved for the purposes of the house of business till that time, when I was to make my choice either of joining it, or of realising my fortune and leaving it. Till then I was dependent for everything on my mother; but I was only to reside with her during alternate holidays, and I was to travel for two years before I was twenty-one.

This spirit of animosity against her which died but with his death, was an acute grief to my poor

mother; but she was obliged to submit. She loved me passionately as the pulse of her life, the idol of her being, and I loved her, or rather, thought I loved her devotedly. My neglected childhood had made me delicate and sickly, and the languor of ill health made me appear to her partial eyes of a gentler, finer character than I really was. I was like my father in person, but apparently of a more affectionate disposition and of a sweeter nature. In me, and in my future career, she garnered up every hope and centered every dream of life. My poor, poor mother!

CHAPTER II.

THE WOMAN I LOVED—MARIAN.

THE next morning I refused to accompany my mother and Fanny when they announced that they were going to take the flower-seeds to Mrs. Villars. Fanny looked innocently pleased, but I could not deceive my mother. She sighed and drew down her veil, and gave the order to drive on.

It was about an hour afterwards that I heard the sound of wheels coming up the avenue. From the couch on which I sat near the library window I could command a view of the approach to the house. I was reading Browning's "Pretty Woman," and was dreaming over the line

> All the face composed of flowers,

as a pony carriage came in sight. It was Mrs. Villars and her little boy. She was driving her-

self, and I had the satisfaction of observing her inimitable grace as she drove up to the door. The servant informed her, I suppose, his mistress was out, for after a pause and a glance up at the different windows, she drove off. I unconsciously and mechanically followed. I could have given no reason why, but I found myself at the lodge gate as she drew up before it. I was out of breath from the speed with which I had crossed the lawn and meadows by a direct path while she had driven round the circuitous one.

She stopped instantly.

"I have called on your mother," she said; "mamma sent me off this morning with a message to Mrs. Spencer. To console Nora for not coming here, I was to ask Mrs. Spencer if she could spare Miss Egerton to us for a few days."

"My mother will be sorry to have missed you, for she has gone to the Grange this morning."

"I am very sorry; but if I make haste, I may perhaps overtake her."

She whipped her little ponies with great energy; but whether they resented this peremptoriness or disliked the previous pause, or from what other cause I know not, after a little preliminary fretting

and consulting with each other, they commenced a series of kicks and plunges which threatened destruction to the little carriage and imminent danger to its occupants. I sprang over the fence which separated the field from the road, and held the horses' heads while the groom lifted out the child and Mrs. Villars, who seemed almost too frightened to stir. After a little discipline, alternated with a little soothing, the ponies became quiet; but she would not get in again.

"I am not afraid for myself," she said, "but for Harry, Mr. Spencer."

She looked pale, and her sweet face was turned imploringly to me.

"But can you walk three miles?" I asked.

"O yes; and I dare say I shall meet with some one who will carry Harry, if he gets tired. Shall I ask the man here?"

I smiled, for I knew the lodgekeeper was out, and that the duty must devolve on me. I explained this, and, with many apologies for taking up my time, she consented to avail herself of my escort.

The groom, looking very black, and muttering observations which did not sound complimentary

to Mrs. Villars's mode of driving, was sent home with the little carriage. He was evidently jealous for the reputation of his horses, and this unwonted exhibition of self-will on their part, he attributed to some provocation given intentionally to them. For my part, I blessed them.

What a walk that was! How much in the sudden intimacy which the circumstances produced she told me of herself, her position—suggested, rather than told, but impressing it only the more forcibly on my imagination. She had travelled with her parents, from the age of twelve, and had resided many years in Italy. This explained something piquant and uncommon in her speech and manner, which is only to be found in the effect of foreign life upon some English constitutions, and accounted for the grace and expression with which our language fell from her lips: the enchanting tones gave something of southern warmth and richness to our cold northern idiom. The "Harry" to her child was like a drop of dew falling from a rose. The elder brother had died of consumption abroad. Her parents had been induced to remain in Italy for fear of the same complaint manifesting itself in her. A short time

before their return she married Mr. Villars. Not a word of complaint passed her lips; but her marriage had evidently not been a happy one. What circumstances had led to the marriage she did not mention, but I inferred it was not the choice of her heart. There evidently had been repression, suffering, and isolation, in her fate. A long illness of her husband had terminated fatally, and she had found herself a widow two years before. I thus met with her free, but almost destitute. She had accepted her mother's invitation to spend some time with her, as soon as her husband's affairs had been wound up, and she had now been residing some time at the Grange.

By the time we had reached it, my heart was in a tumult of pity, love, sympathy for the graceful victim beside me.

The arrival of the carriage without her daughter had alarmed Mrs. Compton, and our arrival was hailed by her with the greatest joy. I had saved her daughter's life, for thus she exaggerated the simple service I had done her; and she therefore welcomed me with the most overflowing demonstrations of delight. She would not hear of my going home for dinner. I remained. Mrs.

Villars was less demonstrative than her mother, but her manners wore an appearance of gentle gratitude, which was precious beyond words to me. I did not feel that this was the second time I had seen her, but as if all my life had tended to this acquaintance, and had been a preparation for it; so that my love sprang to life vigorous, eager, mature.

In the evening Mrs. Villars sang. She chose some simple Neapolitan songs. Her voice was of that vibrating and rich tone which gives such effect to those wild racy melodies. She had twisted some jessamine in her hair, which suited well the chastened softness of her mien. But indeed that graceful head would have looked equally lovely adorned by a wreath of flowers or a bandeau of diamonds. When I left the Grange I was engaged to drive with Mrs. Compton the next day to Raynham Abbey, an interesting ruin about nine miles off, which the families of the neighbourhood visited as an object for a day of pleasure, or for a gay picnic, whenever they had friends staying with them.

My walk home by moonlight that night I shall never forget. Picture to yourself the moving

pageant of a Roman triumph, the banners, the music, the strange adjuncts, all harmonizing with, and at the same time adding a glory, to the victorious central figure, and you will have an idea of what my feelings were, and with what jubilant ecstacy they surrounded and bore up, as it were, the image of Marian Villars. It seemed like exchanging victory for defeat when I left the luminous meadows over which I had passed on my way from the Grange, and entered the shadowy gloom of the avenue which led to Speynings. It was still early, and I thought I saw a light in my mother's room, but I did not as usual go in.

I had a deep conviction that in this turning-point of my life I should not find sympathy in the heart which hitherto had never denied it to me. It was a fatal error.

The next morning's early engagement prevented my breakfasting at home. I had only a moment to read my letters and say good morning to my mother and Fanny; and thus, in the most unconscious and accidental manner, many days passed without any home intercourse. What was thought of these perpetual absences I never paused to inquire. I was floating down a stream too softly

and smoothly to be aware of the rapidity with which I was borne upon it. Three weeks after I had first seen Mrs. Villars, I was desperately passionately in love with her, and a wall seemed to have arisen between me and the inmates of my home. Nothing had been said, nothing done; I never named her name to them, nor was she named to me. The usual tenor of life went on both at the Grange and at Speynings, but visits between the ladies of the two houses became rarer and rarer. A voluminous correspondence was carried on betwixt Nora and Fanny, and that was all.

I had noticed that, since my return, Fanny, though always pleasant and good-natured, had avoided me almost pertinaciously. At any other time this would have piqued me, but now it rather suited me. There was something very childlike in Fanny; in my boyhood her archness and simplicity had sometimes delighted, sometimes tormented me. When a lad is advancing to manhood the raillery of a lively innocent girl is often a positive nuisance to him. My sentimentality was wont to divert Fanny extremely, and was the cause of unfailing quarrels between us; but when I became older I assumed, in

virtue of my five years' seniority, a protective and paternal manner, which was an effectual shield against her; I treated her as a little girl, and she was so slight and small for her age, that it did not seem as absurd as it was, to do so.

On my return I found her grown and developed in person. Very pretty she always had been, but she was now rounding into blooming womanhood, and to most men would have been singularly attractive. To me, however, she would still have been the girl to be patronised and kept at a distance, had I not found, on my return, there was no chance of the old familiar jests and games. She was still "Fanny," and I was still "Hubert;" but in all else our intercourse was changed. It was she who was reserved, and I could not establish the old fraternal familiarity.

My vanity would at any other time have whispered a flattering reason, but I was soon too much pre-occupied to reflect on the cause of the change, though I noticed the change itself. I remember, one day, at the Grange, that Mrs. Compton noticed how changed Miss Egerton was.

"She is quite a quiet, silent girl now, and she used to be so lively and clever," was her remark.

Nora was in the room, and she looked at me with a strange pertinacity in her look, and the colour deepened in her face.

I was silent; I heard, but was too absorbed in watching Mrs. Villars, who was writing a letter, to reply.

She looked up, and said, smiling:

"Remember, mamma, that Miss Egerton is just at that awkward age of transition, between a child and a girl, which some natures find it so difficult to pass through. If she gives way to her natural —what shall I call it?—love of fun, she fears she would be thought a little girl, and she has not yet learned the art of young-lady liveliness. Very few girls are sensible grown women from their cradles, like you, Nora dear."

Nora did not seem to appreciate the compliment, and curled her lip, but she was silent. Let me, however, ask any candid person if Mrs. Villars's remark, kind and considerate as it seemed, was not very disenchanting to its subject. It divested Fanny's timid retiringness of any charm whatever, to treat it as pure awkwardness.

No doubt the conversation was reported to

Fanny by Nora, and she became more and more still and taciturn in my presence. All the nameless little charms which a woman so prettily displays when she has a confidence in herself that she does please, are shut up and curled away ruthlessly when she feels she is not done justice to. The sea-anemone, with its delicate colouring and exquisite form, rising to the surface of the water, is not more different from the gelatinous and coagulated lump which sinks to the bottom of the pool, than the woman who knows she is admired and the same woman when she feels she is not.

My mother loved Fanny too much to "prôner" her to me; but she felt somewhat impatient at my utter blindness to a beauty which was acknowledged by all, and at my insensibility to the sweetness of a nature so entirely truthful and so profoundly affectionate. This impatience was rarely manifested, but when it was, it did Fanny disservice; it hardened me against her, and excited me to think that my mother's jealousy for her protégée, rendered her unjust to Mrs. Villars's attractions.

Almost daily I found myself in the beautiful little morning-room at the Grange, alone with

Marian Villars. The child playing in and out of the room took off from the feeling of our being left alone; at the same time, for all intents and purposes, we were alone. They were mornings over which the primal air of Eden seemed to blow. We did not speak much, but there was the most perfect accord in all that we said. The modest intelligence, the graceful imagination, the refined taste, rather betrayed than shown, completed the impression made by a beauty which I have never seen equalled. I watched her moving about the room, "A spirit, yet a woman too," diffusing light, as it seemed to me, by the mere fact of her presence, and drank deeper and deeper of the fatal cup which she held out to me.

She usually dressed in the lightest colours, generally in white, and the fair hair was always arranged with the most careless simplicity, sometimes gathered up into a net, but usually allowed to wave loosely round her face. "*Elle était plus femme que les autres femmes;*" and this constituted her principal charm. Very young girls are so unconscious, that they become almost sexless, and often jar or grate on the very feelings they excite. Women of her own age, if clever

or beautiful, are apt to oppress one; we feel we do not sway them, we are swayed by them, and are tempted to revolt against them. She contrived to combine the pliant temper of girlhood with the serene suavity of maturity. I went with her to visit the poor; she was the administratrix of her mother's charities. It touched my heart to see her dispensing consolation, giving alms, bestowing advice, and gliding like a moonbeam into their dark and miserable dwellings. My mother and Fanny were also the Lady Bountifuls of the village near which they dwelt; but somehow, their benefactions had never inspired me with the feelings of approbation for them, or the compassion for their protégées, which I felt now.

There were two shadows, however, on this bright picture. One was, that I never advanced, as it were. There was a friendly, almost affectionate intimacy, as to words and manner, between us, but nothing beyond. Her looks spoke a different language. Often and often have I met her eyes fixed on mine with a glance which seemed to reveal a world of inexpressible tenderness, yearning, regret; then she would blush, and

look away, as soon as she was conscious of my observation, and there would be nothing more. True, she allowed me a large portion of her society, but I could build no hopes on this sufferance, for it seemed the effect of chance.

The other was the subtle almost imperious influence which seemed to separate me from my home. She scarcely spoke of it (never certainly unkindly), yet I always felt when I left her a secret feeling of irritation against them. I felt it was scarcely becoming a man of my age (I was twenty-two) not to live in a house of my own; that my mother took advantage of her excessive love to keep me in a state of tutelage; that, like all mothers, she was foolishly jealous; that, in seeking my happiness, she was resolved that that happiness should be derived from her, as from its only source. It would be difficult to explain how these impressions were made: a word suggested a train of thought which led to this feeling, but the word, judged by itself, was guiltless. A latent ridicule was cast on her and on Fanny—that fine intangible satire with which one woman knows how to cover another, and which, like dust, changes nothing, but imperceptibly dims the bril-

liancy and mars the beauty of all which it touches. Certain inconveniences in the mode of living at Speynings were pointed out, which made me dissatisfied with it. Hitherto I had been happy there. Few men could command as I did the society of two women more calculated to render a home pleasant. Both were intelligent and lively, and both disposed—one from her deep maternal affection for me, the other from her regard for and docility to the former—to gratify my every wish and anticipate my every desire. But the fear that all boys have, that their independence may be tampered with, the consciousness that this strong affection which pervaded my whole being, and was the life of my life, was looked upon with aversion by my mother, was the poison which envenomed my home-happiness, and finally destroyed it.

I remember one evening we sat in the library. It opened on the lawn, and Nora and Fanny were walking up and down in the moonlight. My mother sat in a deep arm-chair talking, or rather listening to the conversation of the clergyman of the parish, who sat beside her. Marian sat by my side on the sofa near the lamp. She was working

some gay piece of embroidery. Her slender fingers looked white amidst the bright-coloured floss silks; her eyes were downcast, and she was listening with that serious sweetness which was one of the loveliest expressions of her face. One of her charms was a reticence which left much to the imagination. More brilliant talkers produced less effect, for with her one always felt that one was on the verge of some profound thought or some noble feeling which her diffidence alone prevented her uttering, and the pleasure was thus enhanced. My heart was full. Oh! that life could have paused now for ever, or flamed on for ever, she and I, thus side by side. If the feelings of one heart could inspire the atmosphere which another breathed, Marian must have felt the air glow like a flame around her. Suddenly I looked up. We sat sufficiently apart for our conversation to be inaudible. My mother sat with her cheek resting on her hand, looking at Marian so intently that she did not hear a word which was being said to her. Her gaze was penetrating to sternness; but as the look seemed to sink further and further into the heart of the person gazed upon, it grew darker and darker, and more disapprobation

mingled with its sternness. I involuntarily drew nearer to Marian. Such a look seemed to carry so ominous a weight of condemnation with it, that I was ready to throw myself before her, as if to rescue her from some bodily pain. My mother saw the involuntary motion, and our eyes met; she must have read defiance in mine, in hers I saw compassion and surprise.

It seems absurd to chronicle such a moment, yet it was a very bitter one to me. And in such a wordless, motionless manner, are often the deepest tragedies of our lives enacted. Presently the carriage came, and they left. As Marian rose to go, I folded her soft cloak about her with an insane desire to press her to my heart before them all, and bear her "somewhere, anywhere, out of the world." When I returned from taking her to the carriage the library was empty. I went into my own room, and there sat my mother waiting for me. She looked very pale. I could have sworn in my impatience, but I controlled myself and sat beside her.

"Have you proposed to Mrs. Villars?" she asked, in a cold, constrained tone.

"No."

"Thank God! what a weight is off my heart. My dearest!" she said taking my hand, "listen to me; you know your happiness is my first, my only consolation—"

"People always preface in that way something which cuts it up at the roots," I said angrily.

My mother had a very proud though a very loving heart; she drew back, offended, and said coldly:

"I think it my duty to tell you that I have heard Mrs. Villars is tacitly, if not actually engaged."

"A lie," I said; "some confounded country gossip."

"It may be so; but I tell you, Hubert, you are heaping up misery for yourself by your present self-indulgence. That woman loves nothing so well as herself. As long as it feeds her vanity, she will accept your homage up to a certain point. No doubt she likes you, but she will never bestow any preference on you which will be in any way prejudicial to herself. She is a cold coquette."

"Enough," said I, impatiently, "I love her, and the whole world is as dust in the balance when weighed against that love. I never will believe

a syllable against her, and any one who places him or herself in antagonism with her, places themselves so with me."

My mother's eyes flashed; but she paused, and when she continued, her voice was full of tears.

"It had been my wish that the woman who was to be your wife should be my daughter; and though my heart has little room to hold another affection but that which I have for you, Hubert," and her voice faltered, "it would have made room for her; but if it is as I fear, it will—"

"Empty itself of both! That is just what I expected. Parents always love their children after a fashion I, for one, could never understand. You love me, but I am not free to love whom I will; this is bondage, and I will not put up with it. I should regret any such necessity, of course, but my life must be freed from the chance of this perpetual opposition."

"Hush!" said my mother, as pale as death, and she took up her candle with a trembling hand. "Do not say words which cannot be unsaid. I see a miserable prospect before us—but do not alienate your truest friend. Good night, God bless you!"

and her tears fell fast over my face, and she kissed me.

I would have detained her, for my heart smote me, but she would not be detained. I felt angry with my mother, and angry with myself, and I unconsciously tried, by encouraging the anger I felt, to stifle the terrible suspicion which my mother's first words had raised. Could it be true? was Marian engaged?

It was with a tumult of contending feelings that I reflected that it was possible. I had no claim on her. No perjury to me in word or deed would have burdened her soul—but oh, God! did looks mean nothing? did that consummate gentleness of manner belong to all as well as to me? was the precious pearl of her love a jewel set apart for another?

I passed the night without sleep or rest. I thought not of the pain I had given; I only thought with dread of that which I might be about to receive. I resolved that no later than to-morrow I should put my fortune to the touch, to win or lose it all.

Evil tidings often evoke the spectres of which they speak. The next day, when shaken as it

were by a long illness, I walked slowly towards the Grange, I found, on arriving there, symptoms of an arrival. A strange man-servant made his appearance in the hall, and a large Newfoundland dog rushed out to meet me with the most canine gambols. When I entered the usual morning-room, Mrs. Compton, and not Marian, received me. Lounging on the couch on which she usually sat, was a man about ten years older than myself.

Mrs. Compton introduced him to me as Mr. Warburton. Mr. Warburton acknowledged the introduction superciliously. My loose, lounging appearance, so great a contrast to his own, did not evidently impress him favourably. He was a good-looking man: most of the attributes of beauty were his, in great perfection. Very white even teeth, which glittered as he spoke; large, bright, china-blue eyes, and well-cut features; but the impression of the whole was disagreeable. A martinet neatness of exterior made the most of his personal advantages. But mediocrity was stamped upon him from head to foot; any one so ineffably commonplace I have never known. He was the concentration of conceited mediocrity, combined with that hardness of character which

is so often the undercurrent of a worldly, plausible nature. From mending a pen to guiding a nation, Harry Warburton thought himself more likely to be successful than any one else. He paid the most careful attention to the most trivial things of life, and had a peculiar system, of which he was very proud, in everything. His household, his stables, his kitchen were all directed by him, and engaged his constant surveillance. He imagined his authority pervaded everything; he certainly could detect the most minute peculation in his household; but his friend or his wife might deceive him in the most barefaced manner, and he would remain most ludicrously unconscious of it. To most persons he was insufferable from his aggressive conceit, which he united to the most frank tuft-hunting. No one thought him an actually bad man; he would walk a mile with the utmost goodnature to save his friend a shilling, though he would just as soon make unscrupulous use of the shilling thus saved, for his own purposes. I little imagined, as I looked at him, and his peculiarities affected me more and more, that he would inspire me with one of those strange feelings, partly amical partly inimical, which, in a

nature so weak and inconsistent as mine, would be more enduring than stronger affections. At first, I confess, I felt unmitigated dislike.

He soon rose and left the room, bored apparently with my monosyllabic replies to his questions, and I was left to entertain Mrs. Compton. I waited for nearly two hours, but no Marian appeared. During the pauses of our conversation I heard animated conversation up-stairs, for it was summer, and doors and windows were wide open. I could distinguish the measured, metallic tones of Mr. Warburton, but not his words. Once I heard the voice of Marian calling out impatiently, "Be quiet, Harry," and I was glad thus to know that her child was with her, but that was all. At length, tired with my long and vain waiting, I rose, took my leave, and commenced retracing my steps homewards.

As I walked on I met Nora and Fanny; their cheeks were flushed, as if they had been conversing on interesting subjects, and Fanny's eyes looked red, as if she had been crying. Nora looked at me steadfastly for a moment, and then, in a broken and agitated voice, said, "How do you like my brother-in-law?"

Fanny made an ejaculation, as if to stop her; but she went on, seeing I did not reply.

"Yes; my sister Marian is to be married to Mr. Warburton in a fortnight. They have been engaged some time, and were to be married in two months' time, but some affairs of Mr. Warburton's have been settled sooner than he expected, and he arrived this morning with the good news."

She might have gone on for hours—I was literally stunned. There was a pause. At that very minute little Harry, who had been walking with them, ran up to me. I started as I saw him.

"It was not to him she spoke," I murmured.

"Look, Hubert," he said, "look at this pretty sword, Papa Harry has given me."

I required nothing further; those innocent lips had spoken my doom. Both girls looked at me earnestly; I felt I turned white, and instinctively Fanny put her hand on my arm. I put it aside. I joked, I laughed, I tossed up little Harry in my arms till he shouted with delight; and left them astonished and doubtful of the truth of their surmises.

I locked my door behind me when I entered

my room. I will not describe the hour or two which followed. I then rose, and rang for my servant. I told him to pack up my things, as I was obliged to leave Speynings by the next train; asked for my mother, heard with relief she was out, wrote her a few lines of hasty farewell, and the evening of the next day I was in Paris.

CHAPTER III.

THE WOMAN I LOVED—MARIAN.

I SPENT two years out of England. After some time had passed, I wrote regularly to my mother, and poured out to her the feelings of my heart. They were more bitter than I can describe. It was like the fierce unslaked thirst of a fever unassuaged and unassuageable. Balzac says that the loss of an anticipated happiness is far more poignant than the loss of something which has been enjoyed. The imagination suffers, and adds to the suffering of the feelings. There was such a blending of the passion and the dream in my lost hope, that it almost drove me to madness. But in suffering and in sorrow, in love and in hate, still rose the fatal image, to haunt, to pursue, and to torture.

I tried everything. We are told that men have a thousand resources and pursuits, and that nothing obliges them to cherish the memory of an unhappy affection. I believe most men have felt as I did, that though the choice of these resources is ours, their efficacy is vain. I might as well have stayed at home gazing at a picture of Marian, as to have sought by any means whatever to remove her image from my sight. I plunged into dissipation, I occupied myself with politics, I travelled, I read; but I could not succeed in cheating myself for a moment. I endeavoured to fancy myself in love with others; it was a miserable failure. Well had it been if the additional sorrow had been confined to myself: but with the selfishness which was mine, both from education and nature, in these experiments I wantonly sacrificed the happiness of better natures than my own. After a brief season of passionate demonstrations of love, for it was almost with ferocity that I attached myself to the Cynthia of the minute, hoping thereby to efface the past from my thoughts, some unconquerable recollection would in a moment sweep over me, and drown, as in a

flood, my present fragile fabric of love, and I would break off in despair.

When the feeling I had excited had been as factitious as my own, this was easy work, and the outer decencies were preserved, each fell away quietly; but in others where I had met with an honest nature, and, little deserving as I was, roused a sincere affection, the rupture was harder and more violent, and with each wrench I lost some of the integrity of my soul. I was fast deteriorating in character and in habits. I became even more self-indulgent and callous to the claims and feelings of others.

At one time a morbid, superstitious feeling took possession of me. I thought this great disappointment had been sent for the purpose of disenchanting me with the world, and leading me to a life of serious self-denial and stringent discipline. Had I been a Roman Catholic I should have entered a cloister under the pressure of my sickening disgust with all men and all women. This phase was as transitory as the others; but while it lasted I read with avidity monastic legends, biographies of such men as St. Francis, Ignatius Loyola, de Rance, &c., and wrote

endless meditations and reveries on sorrow, disappointment, and the stern realities of life.

I worked myself up into a kind of pseudo-ecstasy of devotion, and prayed with passionate fervour that I might endure, overcome, forget my grief.

I found one of these effusions the other day, and I transcribe it to give a faint notion of my state of mind at this period.

I had purchased a print from a German picture painted to illustrate a Spanish legend. A monk in the prime of youth is represented as prostrate at the feet of a life-size crucifix in his cell. He is praying with passionate supplication, and the Saviour is bending down from His cross to raise him from the ground. The face of the monk—pale, tear-worn, agonised, yet with earnest faith expressed in it—was very striking; no less so the tender compassion on the face of the Saviour. 'So would I pray," I used to think, "if I could be so answered."

I.

Am I not bound within a darker cell,
A life all tangled, desolate, and crossed?
Have I not struggled, suffered? Dare I tell,
Al I have yielded, sacrificed, and lost?

II.

Within as closely barred a dungeon grate
  Have I not pined for air, and light, and sky?
But stronger fetters and more ruthless hate
  Have pent me in . . . the free winds pass me by!

III.

Have I not failed in all, and yet forborne
  To envy happier hearts, nor hardened mine?
Am I not weak, and weary, and forlorn?
  Oh, lift me from my Cross, I would clasp thine!

IV.

If, clinging to Thy Cross, I once could feel
  Thy hand in mine, my head upon Thy breast,
I would fling down life's burdens, and would kneel
  At Thy dear feet, until my soul found rest. . . .

V.

How bitter is this world of heartless men!
  How, bitterest of all, to hope in love!
Christ Man! descend to me, that I again,
  Christ God, may rise with Thee these woes above!

VI.

Why here I loved aught else, wert Thou not there?
  Why should my soul have clung to aught but Thee?
Alas! that perjured sweetness was so fair! . . .
  Thou, Crucified! sustain and pity me.

VII.

I gave my soul, for her false soul to grieve;
  I gave my heart, for her cold heart to waste;
I wiped her tears—how did those tears deceive?
  I saved her life; see, how is mine defaced?

VIII.

Above the ashes which were once my soul
  I stand; in earth, in heaven, I have but Thee.
Let the wild past be shivered as a scroll;
  I heed it not; Thy face doth shine on me!

My letters betrayed my state of mind and feeling to my mother, and made her miserable. She mourned over me, and she mistakenly enough, but naturally enough, attributed my change to Marian, and her deep-rooted dislike to her increased.

She was wrong; there are affinities which are unerring. No healthy love for a young girl of my own age, whom I could have loved and married in a straightforward way, would have been possible to me. No fidelity was in me to bestow upon reciprocated love. I required just such an irritating, unsatisfied longing to keep up in me the feeling which was to remain alive when all else was dead in me.

It was at Venice that a circumstance occurred, which will prove how hard had become that heart which in my childhood and youth had been pronounced as tender as a girl's; but the softness of which was more to be attributed to physical weakness and nervous sensibility than real gentleness. It will also show what futile attempts I resorted to, to learn that strange art of forgetting, that power so capricious and so impossible to regulate. Days, and weeks, and months of my

mother's devotion and of Fanny's kindness, passed away without leaving a trace; and not a word that Marian had ever spoken, not an airy grace which she ever displayed, not a turn of that enchanting head, not a fleeting blush on the soft, fair face, not a look from those large spiritual eyes, ever passed from my mind.

I was in a gondola late one evening. It was a festa, and the lagoons were crowded. It had been a warm day, but the wind had risen, and brought with it a feeling of freshness and relief. The water was sparkling, and dancing, the gondolas (each with its light) flew along like fire-flies, and the whole scene was most animated and picturesque.

A gondola shot past me in the direction of the Piazza San Marco. I saw a white dress, a black lace veil through which shone golden hair, and a hand that looked like a white flower in the moonlight, was holding the folds of the veil together under the chin. The attitude, the height, the dress irresistibly recalled Marian. A hope, sharp and piercing as a serpent's sting, pierced into my heart. I told my gondolier to follow. In the press of boats I could not get very near, but I

saw where the gondola stopped, and that out of it stepped two women and a man. It was some time, however, before I could come up to them, the Piazza was so thronged. I looked through the cafés, and among the various groups, but in vain. At length, in a corner of one of the furthest cafés, I heard singing. A man with a rich barytone voice was singing, in the soft Venetian dialect, a stanza of Tasso's. I was drawn to the sweet sounds, and seated at a table near the minstrel was the same woman, her veil was thrown back, and she leaned her cheek on her hand. My heart stopped its beating. She was like, yet not Marian. It was but a resemblance, one of those strange, startling resemblances! The eyes were a little darker, the forehead somewhat higher, the mouth smaller, but less finely cut, the hair less wavy; trifling discrepancies, which did not at first sight take away from the effect, but which on further acquaintance I detected, and which were signs of a different disposition. Less volatile, less versatile, more genuine. I introduced myself to these women. I found that the elder was a workwoman, the man and the younger woman were her step-

brother and step-sister, and were being educated for the stage, the brother as a singer, the sister, Veronica, as an actress.

I introduced myself as an artist. I said I required a face like Veronica's, for the principal figure in a picture I was painting. Would she sit to me? She consented. The sister claimed a trifling remuneration. I fixed the next morning for her first sitting.

I waited for her with an agitation which I can now scarcely comprehend. It seemed to me that this representation of her in my room brought Marian nearer to me, that the death silence between us would be broken by this; it was like the spiritual manifestation, through an ordinary medium, of some glorified spirit.

In the morning, about twelve o'clock, my door opened, and the Venetian girl stepped into the room, holding by the hand a little boy, her sister's child. She wore a white dress and black veil. I seated her in a deep crimson arm-chair by the window, and arranged my easel. When I had done, and while I was half concealed by it, I strove to realise the present; it was vain, it seemed to blend in a mocking phantasmagoria

with the past. The child playing about the room, the lovely serene grace of the attitude, the eyes, the hair, the beautiful hands—oh, God! how like she was, and what a miserable outcast wretch I felt.

After two hours she rose, and I fixed the same hours for the morrow, and she bade me farewell in the soft wooing accents of her language, and was gone.

The beauty of this woman was certainly marvellous. Her walk, her mien, her gentleness, were all as if she had been born in the purple. In her conversation, perhaps, one might have detected that she was uneducated, but she spoke very little. In this, again, she was like her prototype. This indulgence was to me like opium: I could not resist it, though it unnerved me for the whole day afterwards.

Veronica, so she was called, had a mild, indolent manner, which gave one the idea of almost lethargic coldness, but was in reality a veil to the most impassioned sensibility. She was afraid of herself. Her health was so weak that the least agitation might produce a fatal effect. I was warned of this by her sister. I found out still more from herself. During our mornings she

confided to me much of her simple history. She and her brother had been brought up by this half-sister, much older than herself. The father had married twice, and the mother of the two younger ones was a German, and from her, Veronica inherited her golden hair and fair complexion. She had been educated to sing on the stage, but over study or natural delicacy had so weakened her, that after a very successful rehearsal she had broken a blood-vessel, and had almost completely lost her voice. All hope of that career was over. She had been obliged to give it up, much to her regret. She was now in hopes of becoming an actress. Her exceeding beauty, and her sweet-toned voice, well fitted her for this; but I doubted her strength, and she herself was very desponding. It was a beautiful nature. The reserve of the colder northern race had given to the Venetian refinement and delicacy, without taking from its glow and vitality. The white brow, over which the blue veins were so clearly traced, was pensive and thoughtful, but the full-curved, deep-red lips opened like a pomegranate, and were tremulous with sensibility. She had never loved. This I had discovered soon after

our first meeting. Her sister and brother had till then occupied her heart. Her studies had engrossed her thoughts, and, strange to say, an Italian girl of humble position, and devoted to a trying and equivocal profession, was as spirit-pure as any English girl, fenced from all harm by the care and protection of an English home.

I observed that as our sittings continued she lingered longer, spoke more, and though still very timid, she answered me more frankly and readily. Sometimes, when I raised my eyes from my work, I found hers fixed on me with a questioning and yearning look. With that expression on her face she was the image of Marian, and I have sometimes, with an exclamation, rushed from the room, unable any longer to support the fatal resemblance.

She knew nothing of me or of my history, but English artists are sufficiently common in Italy for her to believe, without any doubt or suspicion, what I had said the first day we met.

Sometimes her sister came to fetch her, and I was pleased with the unvarying affection with which she treated Veronica. If she found her looking a little tired she would invariably turn round upon me, and almost fiercely warn me that

her sister's life hung on a thread. It seemed difficult to believe this, for the form was rounded, and the cheeks had a delicate bloom. But she was right. The fatal disease was going on insidiously all the while. I try to think so at least.

One or twice I thought I would give it up, but I could not. The dreamy felicity which I thus secured for two or three hours every day was a pleasure I could not deny myself. Insensibly the time was lengthened out. After the painting was over I taught her English, and her progress was sufficiently rapid to interest me in the task. I was much interested in her, and the adoration I felt for the image she so vividly recalled gave my manner an impassioned tone which must have deceived her.

I could see (alas! an innocent girl's heart does not veil its feelings very profoundly) that she was becoming attached to me. Her face was bright as a morning sunbeam when she entered; when she quitted me there was a look of soft regret which dimmed its beauty. We would talk of England—she was very curious about its customs, ways of living, country and town habits. Poor Veronica! she dreamed, no doubt, as youth often

dreams,—lost to the actual, absorbed in the ideal. A man of honour, or of the most moderate generosity, would have desisted, but I was not the man. When in her presence I felt a pleasure and an emotion which was inexpressibly exciting. It was partly Marian, partly Veronica. When absent, Veronica faded away and Marian's image remained alone. I was, however, of so susceptible an organisation that the subtle influence of the presence of so beautiful a woman had its own distinct share on my feelings. Then wild thoughts would master me, and I would ask myself whether I could not accept the portrait, fatally separated as I was from the original. But in all my different cogitations and reflections no thought crossed my mind how far the game I played would involve the poor girl's own future.

At length one day, it had been a very warm and sultry one, the windows were open, not the slightest breeze from the water below waved the heavy curtains, I was painting, lost in a sweet but sad dream, and Veronica, a little fatigued by her long sitting and lulled by the silence, had fallen asleep. It was so warm at noon now that

she did not bring out her little nephew. Her head was thrown back, and the deep crimson-coloured cushion of her chair lent its tint to her delicate face, a little paler than usual that day. Her long lashes rested on her cheek, and through the white and transparent eyelids the colour of the eyes was faintly perceptible. It was a living portrait of Marian. I gazed on her and felt bewitched. I rose softly, put back the easel, approached and knelt down before her. It seemed that by magic art Marian was before me. All my vain yearnings, all my unsatisfied desires seemed to surge over my soul. I bent my head lower and lower, till my forehead almost touched her folded hands upon her lap. Oh, that I had died then and there! Suddenly she woke, and with an exclamation started to her feet, and with a look, glorified in its ecstasy, held out her hands. Surprise first, and then rapture, gleamed in her face.

"Do you love me?" she murmured.

I could not subdue the evil spirit within me. I folded her in my arms. I was intoxicated, entranced, delirious. "Mine, mine at last." I was mad, I hope and believe, at the moment.

I hushed the voice of conscience. I was acting a lie, but a tempter within me whispered "it may become a truth, and this love may overcome the first. This, this may be the consolation time has reserved for you."

The hours passed. Her brother came for her. I dismissed him on the pretext that I would take her home in an hour or two, as I was just concluding the picture. I could not spare her till it was finished. Yet as the time passed there were sudden and abrupt variations in my manner. She was aware of them, for she once or twice looked at me long and steadfastly as if a doubt had arisen. But it passed. There were also mystic moments of ineffable delight during that day. Her hand stirred in mine with a clinging hold like a little bird which has found its nest.

The idolator whose carved image has, he fancies, replied to his prayer, must feel a wondering rapture such as was mine at intervals during this strange day.

I took her home. Before getting into my gondola, as we descended the broad stairs of the old palazzo, a man with a huge basket of flowers was ascending them. I took at hap-hazard a bunch.

They were tuberoses. I gave them to her. As I did so the man said:

"Do not give those to the bella signora, they fade more quickly than other flowers."

She smiled, and said to me, "No, no, I like them best;" and then in an undertone, "Does not everything fade, and happiness, quickest of all?"

As she held them in her hand, bending her tender face over them, I thought I had never seen her look so beautiful. The graceful and fragrant flowers, the lovely woman, the rippling water below, the swarthy gondolier, leaning on his oar, awaiting us, and the deep blue sky above, formed a picture I shall never forget.

We spent an hour or two on the Lagoon. It was late when we returned. I asked her if she would sing to me. I forgot at the moment it was a risk for her. She complied immediately, but unfortunately chose the same Neapolitan air I had heard Marian sing. Those sounds broke the spell for ever. I started up with an oath, and almost roughly put my hand before her mouth. She looked shocked.

"Never, never," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Do not ask me. Oh, Marian!—oh, God!"

I was completely overcome, and burst into tears. The poor girl looked as white as death, and sat as if turned to stone. I slowly recovered, apologised, excused myself as best I might. But I could not undo the impression. We arrived at her house; I assisted her out of the gondola, and noticed that, as she got out, she groped with an uncertain step as if she had been struck blind and could not see her way. She would not allow me to accompany her up-stairs; she lived on the highest story. I returned to the boat and looked back; she was standing alone where I had left her. The moon shone on her face; there seemed something strange and menacing in the look.

I went home; I was very angry with myself—angry with Veronica, and I stupefied myself with wine. My conscience accused me, and I could not shake off an impression of impending evil which clung to me and oppressed me like a nightmare.

The next morning I put away my painting; I broke up the easel; I walked up and down the room perplexed and remorseful. My selfishness revolted from the responsibilities which I had brought on myself. What could I do with Veronica?

I was so engrossed with my own thoughts that I did not observe it was long past the hour she usually came. At four o'clock some one knocked at the door, but instead of Veronica there stood her sister. She was most violently agitated, her eyes swelled and red with weeping.

"Come," she said, in a hoarse angry voice, "a gondola is below,—she wishes to see you."

"Who?"

"Veronica!—you have killed her."

"Good God! what do you mean?"

"I besought you to spare her. I told you how delicate she was . . ."

"Speak, woman, what do you mean?"

"Veronica is dying. She returned home last night shivering with fever; she went to bed; two hours afterwards she called me—blood was on her mouth; I sent for the doctor; he says there is no hope; it is the old complaint; some vein has broken inwardly. She told me she had been singing; she has caught cold; you have destroyed her. Come," she added fiercely and quickly, "she wishes to see you,—make haste."

I followed her; I need have no base fears now; Veronica's future was no longer in my hands.

I accompanied her sister to her house; it was a miserable, untidy little apartment, and my heart smote me when I thought what care Veronica must have taken to come daily from such an abode in her spotless neatness. A trifle like this swells the heart sometimes more than a great sacrifice. The tears were in my eyes. We passed into the inner room: on a low bed, drawn into the middle of the small garret, lay Veronica dying. Yes, the death damps were on her brow; the features drawn and livid; the loveliness was changed, and with it the likeness to Marian had faded from the face. The beauty now was nobler, graver, sadder. Death had transfigured it. In her hand was the bunch of tuberoses. How corpse-like and withered they looked! She opened her eyes as my step entered the room. I threw myself on my knees beside her. She looked at me quietly, and then spoke slowly and in broken gasps.

"It is all over," she said. "Why did you play this comedy with me?—to me it was life itself—and is now death . . . It was a fatal game."

"Veronica, forgive me."

I felt she knew, or at least suspected all. By

what supernatural intimation I knew not, but the truth had been revealed to her.

"You have had no pity for me," she continued slowly; "you should have told me frankly at first—it would have been the same to you—but, oh! the difference to me! Why let me dream such a foolish dream—but you are so young," she added with a protective, pitying tenderness, more pathetic than reproach or tears; "you did not know what you did. God forgive you as I do." With a sudden motion she turned and raised the tuberoses to her lips. "These flowers are less changed than I am. I am not like her now, am I? You will want me no more," she sighed; and then a faint fleeting smile passed over her face. It was over.

I knew not how I got home again. It was a melancholy scene. The violent and uncontrolled grief of the poor sister—the savage looks and muttered threats of the brother—the prayers of the priest, and that poor insensible form, so deaf and blind to all the earthly agitation around her. So near, yet so far!

What could be done in the way of pecuniary help to the sister I did; she had no repugnance

to accept it. She saw how grieved I was, and she attributed the fatal end to cold caught on the Lagoon. I might have been unpardonably careless, but nothing more.

The brother suspected more. A dark red suffused his face as I pressed my offers of service on him as on the rest of the family. He declined with an oath, and as I passed him he drew aside as if my touch was odious to him. I received, however, a little consolation from the opinion of the medical man who had attended her. I met him a few days afterwards, and spoke to him. He said that from the time she had broken the large blood-vessel, Veronica's life was a doomed one. She had lived longer than he thought she would.

At one time, such an event would have well-nigh broken my heart—now, I was unhappy, I cursed fate, thought myself under an evil doom, which entailed guilt upon me without any sin of my own, and that was all. This rebellious bitterness of feeling left a corroding power, which served still further to deteriorate and weaken my already perverted nature.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOMAN I LOVED—MARIAN.

I RETURNED to England. I wrote to my mother that I was miserable, that I had tried everything, but that I despaired of all but her love. A mother's love never fails. I had left her negligently, I had been two years absent, during which I had lived a life of utter self-indulgence, and now that the bitter harvest was being reaped by me, I wished to fly to her to save me from myself. I told her I wanted nothing but home and her. I do not know whether I deceived myself, I know I deceived my mother entirely. She believed that a season of repose and home affection would in truth heal the wounds of my soul, and that, afterwards, the good qualities for which she fondly gave me credit would be developed and exercised. The magnetic impulse which lured me to England

I scarcely avowed to myself, and it was totally unsuspected by her. Her heart, a little chilled by my past conduct, sprung back at once with the idea that I needed her, and prepared out of the abundance of her affection a home in which I could renew the peace and freshness of my soul.

I arrived in London. Two days afterwards I met Warburton in the street. He recognised me; he was delighted to see me, and insisted on taking me home to see his wife. They were just passing through London, and were staying at an hotel. His clear, metallic voice, and sharp enunciation, sounded on my ears, but his words made little impression on me. I had an insane wish, I remember, to strangle him as he spoke, and yet I listened with a strange interest—he was hers. We entered; all the self-control I possessed, little enough, God knows, could scarcely support me as I saw her.

"Are you not well?" asked the rich, melancholy voice, and Marian, more beautiful than ever, stood before me.

I muttered something about Venice and illness. My little friend Harry ran up to me, and asked me to look at his baby sister. Seated on the

ground at her mother's feet, circled by toys, sat a lovely little baby girl.

"My Nina," said Marian.

We spoke on common subjects; her husband fidgeted about the room, settling the baby's dress, correcting the boy's behaviour, and calling out his cut-and-dried observations about the weather, politics, and fashionable gossip, with the fussy and hard mediocrity peculiar to him. I felt cold and constrained. I talked of Italy, of my pleasant travels, of my home-sickness, of Fanny, and of my mother, as if my heart was there, and not here. Marian looked at me with soft and penetrating eyes. I could act content no longer; I stammered and turned pale. She knew she still held my heart in her hand, and her line of conduct was, I am sure, instantly resolved upon. That woman wrecked me as completely as a false light on a rock wrecks a vessel. In absence, I had felt hate, scorn, rage; beside her, all died away, and the old fascination asserted its power. She was there; what could I do but love?

After a time I took my leave, more hopeless, more broken-hearted than before. The Warburtons were to leave town the next day, on a

tour of visits. The next day I went down to Speynings.

My mother received me with the tenderest welcome. Her heart was large enough to cover my deficiencies, her nature rich enough to inspire mine with warmth and happiness. For a time only. At first I was touched by her generosity, and made resolves to put aside the weakness of my soul, to bury the Past, to turn to the Future; but these resolves were as unstable as the weak and fickle nature that made them.

By way of bidding an eternal farewell to my weak love, I went to the Grange, a day or two after I arrived. I did not enter the house, but wandered like a lost soul among the grounds. When I returned, I thought I would go to some of the cottages I had visited with Marian. I thought "this is the last day of weakness, let me have it out. At home I cannot speak of her, here these poor people will give me the last opportunity." I did so; I wandered among them, and heard praises of the ladies collectively, but I had not the felicity of hearing any particular mention of my idol. In one of the cottages a child was crying at the door as I entered. I gathered from

her that her mother was very ill, and that her father had gone for the doctor, but that she was afraid her mother would die before he returned. I went in. The woman was delirious, and talking in hurried, inarticulate tones, and I thought I heard her say, "Miss Marian, her that was Miss Compton."

I went up to the bed, and tried to smooth the pillows under her feverish head, and bent low over her to hear what she said, but it was in vain. I did not give up my post till the husband and doctor arrived. Her ravings had become more and more inarticulate.

"Good God! Mr. Spencer," said the doctor, as he came in, "are you aware that woman is dying of typhus fever?"

I involuntarily shrank back. The poor husband was pouring out thanks to me. He thought it was a charitable impulse which had brought me and kept me there. I offered all that was necessary, and returned home.

I was taken ill that evening. The shock my nerves (I will not say my heart) had sustained had told sufficiently on my general health to make me very susceptible to infection, and easily

her strength enfeebled; but I was regardless of all.

The afternoon of the day we arrived, as I was waiting in anxious expectation, the door of the room in which we sat was opened, and to my mother's infinite surprise—for she did not know they were at the Grange—the Warburtons entered. Marian sank rather than sat on a chair at my side. Warburton talked so loudly and quickly that nothing but his voice was heard. When I looked round my mother had left the room. Marian threw back her veil, and there was a pallor on her bright cheek. She asked me most affectionately after my health. The extreme reticence of her manner which suggested so much, though it expressed so little, seemed by its wordless tenderness to reconcile me to irrevocable fate. I drank deeper and deeper of the poison. It was not happiness, but there was a sweetness in the misery I suffered that was as thrilling as happiness. From that day there lay a sword between my mother's heart and mine, but the sharp blade cut into hers. She believed that I had acted a part—she attributed my coming to England to a predetermined plan, and she re-

There are some women for whom the Catholic legend of the heart pierced by seven swords is literally true. My poor mother! her conjugal and maternal affection were the trials of her warm affectionate nature. In both she was wretched.

I had as little pity for her as for any one else, and her own life had been latterly so calm and peaceful, all her feelings had so merged and concentrated themselves into that of maternity, that she suffered from my mental sufferings as much as if our existences had been one. There were moments when my petulance and violence terrified her for my reason, there were days when my voiceless depression wrung her heart. My acquaintance with Veronica, and its fatal termination, I concealed from her, but nothing else in my life, and the retrospect was a sad one.

I made no effort at self-control. The whole man was weakened, physically and mentally, and I gave way to whatever feeling was foremost.

Change of air was recommended to me, and we went to the sea-side. Fanny had been all this time absent on a visit to some friends, and was not to return for many weeks; I had not

seen her since my return. My mother and I were alone. When I urged her to send for Fanny as a help and assistance to her, she positively, and almost sternly, refused.

I have a deep conviction that it is a trial which only the elect of human beings can bear scatheless, to be loved entirely and utterly by another. It requires a depth, a generosity, an abundance, in one's own nature. I felt oppressed. The strength of the great love which my mother felt for me was too much for my heart's vitality. The glowing sunshine extinguishes the feeble fire. It made me very happy at times; at others, I felt there was an inadequateness, an insufficiency in myself which was fatal.

"You are too earnest, mother," I used to say; "one should skim but not dive into subjects as you do."

"When you are as old as I am, Hubert, you will understand that life must be accepted earnestly, if we would make anything of it."

Sometimes I would say to her I felt unworthy of such love as hers. She would smile tenderly and say:

"It is only the natural difference of feeling.

It is always one who loves, and one who is loved. Mine is the best share. It is better, believe me, to love, than be loved: the loving, love longer than the beloved. Be contented that it should be so."

"Contented!" I said, with wonder.

"Yes; I can imagine circumstances which would make you wish you could fly from that love, when its very intenseness might seem a reproach; all I ask, then, from you, is patience. Bear with it: God knows, Hubert, I only ask you to fulfil your own happiness; I seek none for myself; but do you seek it where my wishes and prayers can go with you?"

One evening I was resting on the sofa, when a little confusion was heard, and Henry Warburton walked in. I received him with open arms.

"We are staying in the neighbourhood," he said; "and we heard accidentally you had been ill, and my wife wished to know how you were getting on, for the sake of Auld Lang Syne. Mrs. Spencer, how is he?" He waited for no reply, but went on.

"Pale, I think—pulled down; but we will soon put you to rights."

I introduced him to my mother. I saw at once that he made a peculiarly unpleasant impression on her. I was perverse enough to resent her coolness to him as a wrong to myself; I felt annoyed, and showed it.

What an odd, inconsistent wish I had to please that man! If he were my friend, I could be his wife's. He was most willing, I saw, to be my friend. He had been well tutored. Besides that, he was flattered by my evident desire to please him. I had a certain reputation for talent, and it delighted him to perceive the attention which I paid to his opinions, and the deference with which I agreed with his views. I was the heir to great wealth; I was an excellent friend to have. If his own personal influence, aided by his wife's beauty and good-nature, could make me a friend, I was the best card he could hold. My connection with the great mercantile house at Vienna was not severed by my father's death, or my own reluctance to join it. Till I was five-and-twenty my name (as a sleeping partner, however) was on their books, and in all their transactions. Well made use of, this was a key which might open the way to millions. I was much too important a

person not to be courted by Harry Warburton. His frank, gentlemanlike manner (somewhat patronising, as became our difference of age) concealed his designs from others; but I was shrewd enough to detect them at once. Yet, so deceitful is the heart of man, that had any one asked me my opinion of Warburton, I should have spoken of him in the warmest manner; I tried to persuade myself I thought so; I sought to convince my mother I thought so. It was here that the hitch between us made itself felt. For myself, my sufferings, and my fruitless pain she could have the tenderest pity; but for all this sophistry, this endeavour to reason black into white, she had no feeling but indignation.

Warburton stayed two days. It would have been amusing for a disinterested spectator to have observed how he fussed himself into the management of everything, from the shelling of the shrimps for breakfast to the blacking of the boots, including all the cares of my sick-room. We were left almost entirely together. He told me, he and his wife would be at the Grange in a week, and would stay there a long time. From some things he said, I discovered that his affairs

were very much disordered and involved, from the failure of a house of business in which he had deposited his funds for some speculative purpose; but the bank had failed just as he was about to draw on the money, the realised bulk of almost his entire property; at one blow it had gone; they had but a pittance left. So much for his vaunted worldly shrewdness. He spoke so generously of his resolve to bear all the inevitable privations, and spare them to his wife, that I was more and more charmed with him, and vowed in my heart of hearts that if he would permit it my best efforts should tend to the same purpose. I resolved at once to return to Speynings. My mother was pleased with this desire to return home, and gladly commenced preparations for our departure. I had in our long confidential communications told her so much, promised her so many times to endeavour to overcome my fatal passion, that though she could not tolerate my hasty friendship for Warburton, it did not strike her that this sudden wish to return to Speynings might be identical with the Warburtons' visit to the Grange; indeed, she was ignorant of it.

I remember that at the prospect of some delay

which might have detained us a day or two at Ilfracombe, I flew into a towering rage. The effect was so inadequate to the cause, and was altogether so preposterous, that she looked at me with astonishment. She recollected it afterwards, and understood it as a proof how deep-laid a plan I had formed to persevere in my folly; or rather, as it seemed to her, and was in fact, my sin.

We returned. I bore the journey well. We slept one night in town. I had a disturbed and restless night; but as soon as I awoke I found my mother at my side. My least movement seemed always to be heard by her, and roused her to see if I needed anything. She would sit for hours by my bedside—even after the exigencies of my illness required it—ready to smooth a pillow, to draw a curtain, in short, to soothe and calm my restlessness. Often, after hours of almost delirious tossings to and fro on my feverish couch, I have found myself gradually drop into a peaceful sleep, and on waking refreshed the next morning have found myself in her arms, hushed to forgetfulness, as in the days of my infancy. I noticed not that this trying kind of life was destroying her own health. Her nerves were shattered, and

her strength enfeebled; but I was regardless of all.

The afternoon of the day we arrived, as I was waiting in anxious expectation, the door of the room in which we sat was opened, and to my mother's infinite surprise—for she did not know they were at the Grange—the Warburtons entered. Marian sank rather than sat on a chair at my side. Warburton talked so loudly and quickly that nothing but his voice was heard. When I looked round my mother had left the room. Marian threw back her veil, and there was a pallor on her bright cheek. She asked me most affectionately after my health. The extreme reticence of her manner which suggested so much, though it expressed so little, seemed by its wordless tenderness to reconcile me to irrevocable fate. I drank deeper and deeper of the poison. It was not happiness, but there was a sweetness in the misery I suffered that was as thrilling as happiness. From that day there lay a sword between my mother's heart and mine, but the sharp blade cut into hers. She believed that I had acted a part—she attributed my coming to Kingbond to a predetermined plan, and she re-

coiled from being a participator, even passively, in what seemed to her sin. As long as I appeared open and candid with her—as long as I suffered her to share my sorrow with me—she was indefatigable, but when, instead of seeking to repress the fatal feeling which had ruined my life, I indulged it in a covert and dishonourable manner, she confessed to herself with unutterable sorrow that she was defeated, and yielded up all hopes of my effectual recovery from the moral disease which had enervated my character and prostrated my energies.

I cared for no remonstrances of hers. I was at Speynings, Marian at the Grange. Till my health was established she came almost daily to see me, but as soon as I was able to visit in my turn she desisted. My mother's coldness to her was invariable. I went continually to the Grange. We were always engaged in parties of pleasure which drew me more and more from home, and I stayed there for days. *En tout bien, en tout honneur.* Warburton always invited me; Marian was pleased and consented, but nothing more; no husband could have been jealous. Consummate art was shown by both. Her husband, though he

knew my adoration for his wife, and though he was resolved never to allow it to manifest itself beyond a certain point (he was not an absolute villain), affected to ignore it altogether, and to attribute my constant visits to my pleasure in *his* society. She never varied in a certain gentle manner, though her eyes—those large, tender, deep eyes—told a different tale. Warburton's praises of me rang through the neighbourhood, and when any evil-disposed neighbour said, "How intimate that young Spencer is with the Warburtons," the answer always was, "He is an intimate friend of Mr. Warburton's; besides, there has always been a great intimacy between Speynings and the Grange. It is not surprising that a lively young fellow like Mr. Spencer should prefer the society of such a good fellow as Warburton to a gloomy place like Speynings with that poor invalid, his mother."

My mother was now an almost confirmed invalid, but she struggled against her fast-increasing malady, she was so anxious not to make any claim on me; she would not owe to my compassion for her physical sufferings—those attentions which my love did not voluntarily offer. It

was difficult for a heart so high as hers to comprehend the sterility of mine. My being seemed emptied of all feelings but on one point. I was like a patient suffering from a chronic disease. The strength as well as weakness of my constitution fed my malady and drained the vital springs of my life. If affection is shown by act, I might be said to be devoid of it. I lived a life apart, and after a communion of such entire sympathy as seldom exists between a parent and child, I drew a line of demarcation between my mother and myself. Yet with an inconsistency peculiar to men, I expected precisely the same devotion from her. If I observed a shadow on her brow (and how much had it darkened in these few months) or a colder accent in her voice, I felt as much aggrieved as if I was the wronged one. Her affection was to be poured out without measure and stint, though I would not even stoop to notice it.

Dante's simile is true.* Amid all the voices which sound to a man's ear in life, there is one

* E come in fiamma, favilla si vede
E come in voce, voce si discerne,
Quand' una e ferma, e l'altra va e riede, &c., &c.

voice always distinctly and dominantly heard. When that voice is the voice of God, there is harmony in the music around; when the voice of self is the loudest, there is discord. There was discord enough with me at this time. I was intelligent enough to know how recklessly I was destroying myself, but I was so selfish by nature, habit, and education, that I could not resist taking advantage of the present enjoyment. If there be one thing which is more dangerous than another, it is the sophistry with which we persuade ourselves that because our overt actions are not against the outward law of right we are sinless. So long as I did not persuade Marian to leave her home and children for me, I thought I was guiltless. I imagined I did not betray Warburton's trust if I did not openly speak of love, though my whole being proved it. Marian and I had no explanation. How was it that I understood that her engagement with Warburton had been forced on her, soon after Mr. Villars' death, by the exigencies of her position? Mr. Villars had died deeply involved, and Mr. Warburton, a friend of his in life, had extricated the widow, as far as he could. Gratitude, esteem,

the feeling of isolation, the fears of the future for her boy, had led her to accept his hand, and to consent to marry him as soon as her mourning was over. She came to live meanwhile in retirement at the Grange. When she knew me, her feelings for the first time rebelled against her engagement; but on the one hand she was bound, on the other she had no reason to believe my feelings were really interested in her, though she was conscious I admired her; she saw my mother's dislike to her, and too timid to take such a decided step as to break her engagement with Warburton, and too uncertain of my feelings to acknowledge her own to herself sufficiently to authorise her to that step, she let it go on. My sudden departure had confirmed her suspicion that I had some other attachment. Now that our fates were irrevocable, what was left but a mutual and enduring affection, tenderer than friendship, calmer than love? I was to be her only friend, she would be mine. I might—she hoped I would—marry, but she was to be my only friend. At different times, by veiled allusions, by broken expressions, this was revealed to me. I was persuaded that in all true love Marian

was mine. She tolerated her husband, and for the sake of her children she remained in his house, but love for me was the secret of her life. She must do her duty. That duty was interpreted in this manner. She took all the flower of my life, my thoughts, my time, my anxious service; I was as much hers as the ring on her finger, and she gave me in return sweet, kind words, melting looks, and winning little attentions. What right had I to more? Had I not scores of times sworn that to press her hand, to sit by her side, was more to me than to be the adored and adoring husband of another? As to Warburton, was he not completely satisfied with her docility and gentleness? She moulded him in all things to her will, yet was he persuaded that it was he who managed her. She contented us both. Yes, for the burning jealousy, the bitter yearnings, the death in life I sometimes endured, I blamed myself, raved against Fate—anything, any one, but my faultless and peerless love!

In vain my mother expostulated. "This is disloyal, Hubert. How can you take that man's hand, hold his child on your knee, when——"

"I have a sincere friendship for him. Why not?"

It was this obduracy which made her turn hopelessly away. I felt, however, that things could not continue in this way. The house of business with which I was connected in Vienna needed my presence. From time to time I had indefinitely promised to go there, and I looked forward to it as an escape. I was fast approaching the age when, by my father's will, a settlement of property was to be made, and I should either continue to keep my name in the firm or take it out.

I was so perplexed, so beset by contending feelings and contradictory purposes, that my life was a very purgatory. With the weakness which belonged to me I fancied that change of place would change the circumstances, and I longed to free myself from the evil which my own undisciplined nature had woven round me. I conversed a good deal with the Warburtons on the subject. They counselled me strongly to go to Vienna. He, like all practical men, or so-called practical men, thought it was right to go wherever there was a prospect of furthering pecuniary interests; a studious life, or a contemplative one, was what

he stigmatised as an idle one. Marian, on her side, had an idea—a very erroneous one—that my mother possessed some influence over me, and that that influence was inimical to her. She, therefore, also wished me to leave Speynings. I was maturing in silence my resolve to leave, but instead of frankly declaring my intention of leaving, certain as I was that no obstacle would be made by mother, I was so conscious of having been unkind, negligent, and ungrateful to her, that I made the resolve appear the consequence of wrong done by her.

One day when she was speaking to me seriously on the subject of my perpetual visits to the Grange, which I persisted in attributing to friendship, in the very teeth of my despairing confessions to her, she said:

"Friendship! if you were married to Mrs. Warburton, Hubert, how would you like her to have a friendship for another man such as she has for you?"

"I do not see the object of such a question," I replied.

"Its purport is to warn you, Hubert, Are you so sure of yourself, of her, that you can thus for

ever seek the society of a woman you have so dearly loved, I will not say that you still love, with impunity to both?"

"Why should you doubt it?"

"Because I feel convinced that you are only heaping up infinite sorrow, if not guilt, upon yourself."

"Why, am I not to have friends?"

"Friends? Is it a friend's part, for a woman who is the wife of one man to absorb to herself another man's time, thoughts, happiness; to encourage him to give himself up entirely to her?"

"She is always urging me to marry and settle near them."

"Yes, to give the heart she has rifled to another, to make two miserable instead of one. If she really loved you, would she not urge you for your own honour, for hers, to leave her? If you do not love her, you never have loved her, and all you have told me is falsehood, or you do love her, and this conduct may lead to possibilities of crime."

"The fact is," I said, "there is one quality which every woman possesses, and that is jealousy. You are jealous of Marian, mother."

"Hubert," said my mother, and her eyes flashed, "I can forgive all, but words like these. Never repeat such a word again. It is an insult to me, and an outrage to my love for you. There can be no comparisons possible."

I had never seen her so angry. I was proportionately so. I set my teeth, and vowed with an inward oath to free myself immediately from these discussions and admonitions.

My mother's patience was at last worn out. She looked more grave and unhappy than I had ever seen her. Fanny, who had returned home, was miserable at seeing how ill my mother looked, and soon had scarcely patience to speak to me. All this I construed into wrong done to me, and considered the inevitable consequences of my own cruel unkindness, wanton acts of offence towards me. I was to strike, but no blood was to flow; I was to grieve, but tears were an unpardonable injury.

One morning, a few days afterwards, I announced my intention of spending the day at the Grange, and added, carelessly, that I should sleep there. My mother was silent, but her eyes met mine, and their glance of mute reproach has often

recurred to me. But I had entered upon a downward path, and every minute accelerated my descent.

When I arrived at the Grange, Marian saw there was a cloud on my brow. She was sweetness itself. She asked no questions, but applied herself to soothe my troubled spirit. Being with her was of itself an enchantment and soon soothed away my vexation. She was glad that my ties to Speynings were weakening every moment, for I told her I had determined to leave. To a woman of her stamp the possession of a life to administer to hers, to cherish and adore her, was delightful. She forgot, as we all do, that selfishness, indulged at the expense of the claims of others upon us, recoils sooner or later upon oneself. Warburton lectured me a good deal that morning on the necessity of asserting my own free will, and not to waste my manhood on servile dependence on my mother. To have heard him, one would have supposed my mother had been some doting old woman, who, to satisfy some senile caprice, prevented my engaging in some useful career. He had a way of speaking of her that in any other frame of mind would have en-

raged me: "an excellent person," he would say, "but living so completely out of the world that she was ignorant of the necessities imposed on me by position—her early circumstances, no doubt, had an influence in limiting her views, but her good sense would surely point out to her that tying a man of twenty-five to idleness and a country retirement was not exactly doing her duty."

All he said chimed in so well with my own rebellious thoughts, that his words sounded to me like the wisdom of Solomon.

I could not well go to Vienna for two months, but these two months seemed to me like infinite ages, and I searched for some excuse to shorten the time. It came. On this very morning there came an invitation to the Warburtons from some friends of his in Scotland, with whom I also was acquainted. In the postscript was this sentence:

"If your friend, Mr. Spencer, is better, we should be delighted if he would accompany you. Do you think we could send him an invitation?"

This clenched my doubts. I should be absent for two months, and then I should go abroad.

The Warburtons accepted the invitation for all of us, and we resolved to go together.

Having made up my mind, I resolved to execute it. I was impatient to get it over, and to banish from my thought all but the one ravishing idea, that for two months I should be under the same roof as Marian! She and I, and the children, walked from the Grange together; the children played on in front, and she hung on my arm. We talked of the pleasant prospects of these two months; she delicately handled my bruised soul with her soft indulgence and sympathy; how like an angel she seemed, and my heart rose up in indignant condemnation when I thought "this is the woman I am asked to give up—this is the solace I am forbidden to accept." I did not remember the plain fact that it was not till after Marian's second marriage that my mother had seriously opposed my inclination for her. It was from my own confessions of the wanton way in which she had coquetted with me that she judged her. At present she was passive. Since our last conversation her lips had been sealed. She was not a woman to contend in such a game, or to place a mother's love on the same footing as this holiday friendship, if friendship it were, or in the same category as this sinful

passion, if her surmises were correct, and it was passion.

Marian and I parted affectionately at the lodge, and I paused to see her graceful form fade in the twilight. When I entered the dreary room Fanny was alone. She met me with a serious and reproving look. She told me my mother was lying down; she had heard of the death of old Mrs. Spencer, my great-uncle's widow. Though I did not know her, I knew well the affection which united them, and that, but for my illness in the autumn, she would have gone as usual to see her. When I entered the room where my mother was, I saw she was worn out with tears. My heart smote me, and I spoke more tenderly than usual. She was touched. She held my hand between hers, and pressed it fondly; we talked of irrelevant matters for a while, but my answers were absent and constrained. After having made up my mind to the rupture at once, it seemed vexatious to be foiled. After a while she observed my absence of mind, and asked me what was the matter. After a little hesitation I told her all my plans; she listened calmly:

"When did you say you were going?" she asked, in a constrained voice.

There was not a word of remonstrance or regret I was irritated; the resolution I had come to after so much agitation and pain—for I was a moral coward—seemed to have no import whatever. I was provoked, and my vanity suffered. I turned and said:

"The fact is, you make my home so miserable with your groundless and cruel jealousies, I can stay no longer."

The apparent quiet with which my mother had heard my first words had been an exercise of great self-control. There was too little light in the room for me to see the death-paleness which overspread her face when I first broached the subject, or the convulsive manner in which she clasped her hands together when I had done, or I might have spared her. As it was I persevered. An executioner who has stretched a criminal on the rack, and who finds the first turn of the engine inadequate to force a complaint, may from the same spirit of antagonism, even more than the spirit of cruelty, give it an extra turn. Say what we will, there is something of the tiger in every undisci-

plined human heart. I might now be satisfied with the effect produced. She started up, and the flood of bitter sorrow and disappointment in me, which had been slowly accumulating during these dreary months, overflowed. I shrank back, convicted and appalled.

"If it had been a friend," she said, "who had thrown himself upon another friend, as you cast yourself upon me when you wrote to me from Venice, using my mind, my heart, my time, as ministers of yours in the premeditated and systematic plan you had formed from the date of that letter, to approach nearer the object of your unhallowed passion, and when your end was accomplished, casting off that friend as a worn-out glove, such cold-blooded ingratitude would have seemed heartless enough; but when it is a mother's life and heart's blood you have been playing with, and when you wind up this unparalleled treachery by coming to me at such a time to wound me to the heart, by telling me that all my efforts, my endurance, my kindness, have been in vain—that I who have dreamed, thought, breathed but to lighten your load and assuage your cares, have made you miserable,—

I feel that my sorrow is greater than I can bear. Go, Hubert, the sight of you kills me."

I obeyed her.

The next day passed in a gloomy calm. Though little able to do so, my mother had risen and moved about as usual; she was fearful that I should think she wished to make her illness a plea for delaying my departure.

I escaped to the Grange; it was the hunting-season, and Warburton hunted. Marian needed my society to while away her lonely mornings, and we were left almost entirely alone. A few days afterwards I sent for my servant and belongings, and we left for Scotland. I wrote a few lines to my mother, merely telling her I was going, but without giving any further reason for not seeing her again.

I spent two months in Scotland. I was less happy than I expected. There was a sense of self-reproach which left an ache in my heart. There was, besides, a strange feeling of surprise at having so easily broken the tie with my home. A man who would have used a hundred-horse power to divide a partition which had fallen away

as a match, would have felt as much to use a vulgarism.

We all went to London together, and there I made the final preparations for my journey. It was necessary, for appearances, to go down to [illegible]. I did not wish the world to think I had quarrelled with my mother.

"Never let there be a public rupture between relations," said Warburton. "It is not in good taste. You have asserted your independence"—when had it ever been infringed? "[illegible]," as Marion would say. "Such an excellent person as your mother deserves every attention which does not interfere with the [illegible] [illegible]."

The morning came. Marion seemed dispirited, and as if she grudged every moment I was obliged to pass away from her. Her eyes glistened with tears as I took leave. I could scarcely tear myself away, for in a few days I should have to leave her side. When at last I dragged myself away, I promised faithfully to be back that evening. My first intention had been to sleep at [illegible]. It would be a disappointment to the [illegible] at home, but I resolved, at any price, to

secure a few hours more with her. I should only pass two hours at Speynings.

I arrived in a moody, constrained temper. It seemed that there was latent reproach or covert accusation in all that was said. My mother's pale and changed face was a reproof in itself. The weather was cold; the snow had fallen thick, and the noise of the spades clearing it away sounded ominously. I requested that this should be stopped, and ordered the carriage to wait for me at the lodge, where I said I would meet it. The conversation was dull and inharmonious, in spite of Fanny's good-natured attempts to enliven it. When I had announced my intention of returning by the next train, she had made an exclamation, but a glance at my mother silenced her. She (my mother) said nothing, but a few minutes afterwards left the room.

During her absence Fanny told me the news of the place; how the Comptons had returned to the Grange, &c., &c. My mother returned, looking paler still, but otherwise calm and composed. Each moment dropped like lead on my heart, till I feared at last I should not have strength to go. Suddenly I made an effort and stood up.

"Good bye, my Fanny," I said. I could be certain of her on this last day, for I had done her no wrong.

"Good-bye," I said to my mother, and I took her hand. "I will write as soon as I get to Vienna, and be sure to write and tell me if I can do anything for you there."

"Good bye, Eustace. Be happy, and keep well."

Her voice was hollow and strange, and the hand I held was cold as ice.

"I shall often think of the new grandchildren, Fanny, and of the wonderful flower princes you will see with such an abundant appearance. Good-bye." I again shook hands with her, and was gone.

I drew a long breath, as after running down the avenue I jumped into the carriage, which was to take me to the express train. I had escaped, indeed and indeed it is true, but I was free. My thoughts swung round at once to Marian.

At five-and-twenty I was about to commence the true business of life. As Wordsworth would have said, a man must act and live with men. Women are a pleasure which may fill up the

interstices of life; but when one has left off wearing white pinafores, cut one's teeth, and had the measles, there is nothing in which a woman is really necessary to us. A wife or mistress *c'est autre chose*, but mothers and sisters are best at a little distance.

I never saw my mother again. Twelve months after I left England she died.

During that period I had not only joined the firm at Vienna, but had, by my hereditary and personal influence, made room for Warburton. He and his wife were now domiciled at Vienna.

I was a man who misses a daily intercourse, but whose affections are not solid enough to stand the trial of absence, and I did not mourn my mother much. Besides, there was a sting in such grief as I could not help feeling, which my selfishness led me resolutely to fight against. However plausibly I might argue with myself, there was a sin on my soul. My actions appeared harmless enough. The crimes which darken many minds I was innocent of. I had kept within the outward limit which separates vice from virtue, and yet the mildew of my reckless self-love had destroyed all that came too near me.

The world spoke fairly of me; the Warburtons and their clique praised me to the skies; but character sooner or later finds its level, and I did not retain my friends; but I was in the bloom and spring of life, my face was turned to the ascent of the Mountains of Delight. What had I to do with memories of that fair face hidden under the sands which are washed by the Adriatic Lagoon? Why should I torture myself with thinking how irreparably I had grieved and wounded the heart which now lay at rest under the chancel of our old church?

But it is the worst of characters like mine, to see the right and pursue the wrong. My intelligence pointed out to me where my errors injured me; but my will, long perverted by self-indulgence, had not power to alter. I soon began to discover that some of the glory of my love was dimmed. I still adored Marian; but constant intercourse had robbed my love of some of its fairy enchantments. Reaction had followed the excitement in which I had latterly lived. Besides, I had attained, as far as I could, the object of my desires.

It is extraordinary how brief is the phase of

contentment in some minds, and how soon the balance weighs downwards. We ascend the hill with great difficulty, but the place at the top is so narrow, that in a very brief time we are obliged to descend. In the gay circles of Vienna Marian was very much admired. The besotted vanity of Warburton was such, that he imagined it was his society which attracted the Viennese youth to his house. I used to feel enraged at his self-satisfaction. Certainly Marian had art enough to manage a score of admirers without compromising herself or committing him. Not one of these gay and gallant courtiers imagined, I am sure, that the slouching, dark-eyed young Englishman whom her husband was so fond of, was acknowledged by her to be her only friend.

But I was not happy. There were times when I was almost suffocated by contending feelings, when I felt I must break through it all, and either snatch away Marian to be my own in some far foreign land; or taking an eternal farewell of her, return to England, and bury myself at Speynings, out of sight of that fatal beauty which had destroyed my life. Marian and I had spoken of the former alternative; her children were her

excuse for not acting up to the love she professed. No, she could not leave them; how could I ask it? was that my love for her? She could understand a woman sacrificing herself, but not bringing shame on her children. Whether the difficulty was not in reality her dislike to change a position which had so much that was seducing to a woman of her inclinations, for the solitary companionship of one heart, I will not affirm. Besides, it was not even an alternative; she had hitherto united both, the homage of the world and my unswerving fealty. Why should there be a change? If I was not happy I could go. In our unfortunate position, she said, we must each forego something.

She fancied she kept within the limits of virtue (she piqued herself on her religious principles, and had a great fear of the devil) by remaining in her home. Yet where was her loyalty to her husband when she knew of my love, and, under the specious name of friendship, allowed me to speak of it? Under the name of friendship I was to be hers, and hers only. I had a vague feeling, sometimes, that a straightforward woman would have said, "Leave me; it is not good for either of

us to continue a feeling which must bring, eventually, so much pain on both. Your heart must need a fuller feeling than I can bestow on it. Give me your friendship, but seek another woman's love. Love cannot exist without hope, and hope I cannot give you. Leave me for a while, and put me out of all calculation in your hopes of future happiness. You will thank me one day for what seems coldness now."

She never said this. She took for granted that the anomalous position in which we were was to be eternal, and on the least evidence of impatience or desire to break my chain her eyes would seek mine, and their look of mournful reproach would instantly recall my wandering allegiance. At last, however, even she began to feel that some change was a necessity. She feared the effect of custom. She dreaded the daily increasing irritability of my temper, which might at any moment cause a scene between us, in which she might have to abdicate some of her superiority. She, at last, herself counselled me to go.

It was necessary I should go to Speynings; the large fortune which had been vested in my mother by my great-uncle she had bequeathed

almost entirely to me. To Fanny she had left a modest competence. The rent-roll of Spevnings was not in itself much, but the large sum of ready money in the funds, and my father's fortune, made me a rich man.

I wound up my affairs at Vienna; I invited the Warburtons to pay me a long visit the first congé he had, and returned to England. The day I left, Marian was very pale, the tears were in her eyes. It was winter; she fastened a small cashmere scarf around my throat with her own white hands.

"You must take care of yourself for my sake."

She was rarely so demonstrative, and my heart melted within me. So soft to her, how strangely hard that heart had become to all else!

CHAPTER V.

WHEN I approached Speynings I found the house shut up. I was fatigued by my journey, and ordered a fire to be made in the library, and spent there the rest of the evening. For the first time, perhaps, I realised my loss. The silence and loneliness of the house seemed a type of my future life. As Speynings was without its mistress, would my life be without the love which had once so boundlessly ministered to it? I knew that both in public and in private I was considered a prosperous man. I was rich, master of a good estate, well educated, well born; there was not an unmarried woman in the county who would not have willingly accepted my hand and my estate; but those fatal blue eyes which had shone upon me for so long, had parched all the verdure of my soul. What love had I to give?

What love could I receive? I might become a husband and a father, I might to a certain degree surround myself with the ties of life; but the very idea of them was like water to a drunkard. I covered my face with my hands.

Fanny Egerton had gone to live with her friend Nora after my mother's death. Nora had married Mr. Maynard, the rector of the parish of Speynings. The Rectory was within a walk, and I went over to the Parsonage the next morning to see Fanny. Her pretty rosy face was as pale as death as I entered the room. As we shook hands, I felt hers was cold as marble. I asked her a few questions, which she answered with the greatest reserve. I asked some questions about Speynings.

"I have not been there since——"

"Why not?"

I spoke as kindly as I could.

"*I* go to Speynings after . . ." Fanny burst into tears.

"I promised," she said, looking through her tears at me, "that I would see you; that I would be as friendly as—as—before you left England: I cannot keep my word. Do you know how you

made her suffer? The day you left she went to your room. She threw herself on your bed, and would not permit me to stay with her. In the morning, when I went to see her, I saw she had cried all night. I heard her call out, 'my son, my son.' The only thing which occupied her till her death was to arrange everything as she thought you would like it."

It was true; I had found everything arranged precisely as I most liked it.

After that evening I took care not to speak to Fanny again on that subject. I found much which required my attention, and wrote regularly to the Warburtons. Sometimes I went to the parsonage. After her first burst of feeling Fanny was polite, but never cordial. She had much improved in person; there was an air of thought, of decision in her face, which became it well. She was adored in the village, and was the sunbeam of the house in which she lived. The Maynards would not spare her to any one, though she had relatives who were continually asking her to live with them. She would be absent for awhile, but always returned to the parsonage. My nature must have been warped at the root,

for I found she was attractive to me in proportion to the entire loss of my influence over her.

All persons have an atmosphere that impresses others. No one was more sensitive to these impressions than I have been. Marian inspired a delicious languor, which soothed, but perhaps enervated. Fanny, on the contrary, roused a spirited activity. Health was the spirit of her being, mentally and bodily. One felt that here was a sound organisation. The difference might be compared to the perfume of a magnolia and the aromatic fragrance of mignonette. The racy sweetness of the latter revives, as the voluptuous odour of the former oppresses the senses.

With my usual plausibility I tried to bring back our former intimacy. I dilated on our old familiar affection. How often had my mother hinted that it would gratify a dear wish of hers if I loved Fanny. How often had it been a reproach to her in my mind when she expressed any disapprobation at my folly, that that desire had perverted her taste and made her censorious. *Now* the thought passed through my mind, had

happiness been near me, and had I wantonly averted my head from it?

One evening, as I was walking in the shrubbery with Fanny, I spoke to her in something of a sentimental strain. She replied more kindly than I anticipated. I began making some allusions to the emptiness of Speynings—how I had missed her—how hard it was that she was no longer there. I made allusions in a kind and tender tone—kinder and tenderer than my wont, or than she had been accustomed to from me in our former days. She started; then allowed me to go on with a look of the most blank astonishment; and then she paused; and as the colour flew into her face and her eyes sparkled with anger, she looked superb in her indignation. She replied:

"I will not affect to misunderstand you, Mr. Spencer (since my return she never addressed me as Hubert), but you must know nothing could possibly add to the strong disapproval—I may say aversion — with which your past unkindness to her inspired me, unless, indeed, it were this strange conduct. I neither feel flattered at your commendation nor your regrets."

"Excuse me," I said, with pride equal to her own. "I fear I have expressed myself ill. I have no such pretensions as you seem to suppose. I know too well your prejudices against me, and I resent them too much ever to seek to correct their injustice." I bowed and left her, hoping I had planted a thorn in her heart. My vanity was so mortified that I was glad of this painful revenge.

The undercurrent of remorse and regret which was beginning to surge through my heart made me pitiless and cruel. I returned from the Parsonage in a storm of indignation. That that young woman should judge me, mortified me beyond measure; the more so, perhaps, that my conscience told me she was right. I sat moodily at home, resolving to leave Sparrowings, and shut it up as soon as I conveniently could.

Suddenly I heard the noise of a horse galloping up the avenue. The unusual hour for a visit alarmed me. I inquired who it was. A telegraphic despatch was brought to me—sent by express from the neighbouring station. It entirely changed my fate. Harry Warburton was dead!—Mrs. Warburton and her children were on their way to England!

Poor Warburton!—his end was characteristic of his life. He and some of the men of his stamp had organised some races, and he had resolved to ride his own horse. He had been advised—warned—but he persisted, and was thrown and killed on the spot. By me he was mourned—strange though it may seem to say so. My life had flowed in one particular course so long, that it was difficult to force it into a new channel. My first feeling was a mysterious dread of evil. Marian free!—and who were bound to each other, if we were not. Then difficulties rose before me—obstacles—delays. Away from Marian I could remember she was much older than I was. Her children were growing up; she and they were penniless; they would be a great charge and responsibility on whoever became Marian's husband.

The consummate tact of Marian was never more clearly manifested than in our meeting. She no doubt understood the ground was less secure than formerly. She was not alone, was kind and cordial, but very sad. She spoke more of her loss as regarded her children than herself. There was no parade of grief which might have seemed hypocritical, there was no semblance of indifference

which might have seemed unfeeling. There was no air of intimacy which might lead to conjectures, or recall claims. There was the exact and due consideration given to me as one of Warburton's dear friends. How many he had! I met several offering their services! Among them was a certain Lord Lascelles, who had become known to them after I left Vienna, who was very attentive. It was distinctly impressed on my mind, though how I cannot describe, that if I hesitated I should be superseded.

I checked all prudential misgivings, for I was still in love, and a year and a half after Warburton's death, Marian was my wife. Lord Lascelles was the eldest son of an Irish peer, but the property was heavily mortgaged; in everything but title he was my inferior, and I must do Marian the justice to say that she did not pause in her choice.

I announced the fact of my marriage to Fanny, but received no reply from her.

I suppose all men attain a period of disenchantment. Some earlier than others. The love which had robbed my youth of its purest joys failed, when won, to lend its charm to my maturity. I

looked with despair on my own heart, and on the blank which was there.

Very selfish persons become prematurely old. Life is to each like a reel of silk. We all take one into our hands, some use it for their work, and when the reel is used the silk looks gay in the work which it has finished. Others hold it so carelessly that it all runs out at once, and leaves only the bare wood. I had used my life so prodigally and selfishly that I had got to the wood at the age when most men have only commenced their reel, and what work had I done?

Marian was my wife, and though her beauty was not so radiant as it had been six years ago, it was still great, yet I dared to whisper to myself I was disappointed. It was not so delightful to me to spend the morning in her sitting-room, now that I could be there whenever I chose. She herself seemed to think it somewhat of a bore. There was a stimulus wanting. I saw little faults in her which I had not detected previously. A want of depth in her nature which produced a smallness, a pettishness about trifles. Hers was not the sunny temperament which could extract pleasure from all things, and flower and bloom

with the first ray of sunshine. She needed excitement. Her husband's admiration did not suffice for her, and as her beauty was a little less universally attractive, and did not win her the admiration of others so much as it had done, there was a bitterness, which, though concealed in society, sometimes made itself perceptible at home. Perhaps, had my own nature sustained, vivified, developed hers, it would have been different, but I was too much like her. There was a sterility in both which in me had been veiled by youth, and in her by grace, but which was soon evident. The poor material on which such gay embroideries had been lavished, now that time had told on it, displayed itself; instead of sumptuous brocade, it was beggarly canvas. Thousands of men are more unhappy from faults than vices; but with me it was more the negation of happiness than the positive pang of unhappiness. Sometimes a devil whispered to my heart :—"Are you assured that you do possess her love? Warburton always believed he possessed it entirely." However much my self-esteem might insinuate a difference, there were misgivings.

I began seeking for other interests to fill up

life, and like most men disappointed in their affections, I turned to politics. There were signs which boded a general election, and I resolved to stand for the county. We went down to Speynings. I commenced the work of canvassing with great spirit. Three days after my arrival I gave a large dinner party, at which most of the magnates of the county were to be present. I had sent an invitation to the parsonage; it was refused, but the servant who bore the refusal left a packet for me. I opened it; the outside was addressed in Fanny's hand, but without a word from her. The inside was a case containing a magnificent parure of diamonds, necklace, bandeau, brooch, &c. On a paper was written, in characters somewhat faded by time, "For my beloved Hubert's wife, from his mother." There was also a letter, but just as I was opening it I heard Marian's step, and a feeling I could not explain, led me to conceal the case and letter in a drawer. She entered to speak to me about her dress, and to lament some accident which had happened to her ornaments. I immediately gave her the diamonds, but without mentioning how they had come into my possession.

She was enchanted, but reproached me for not having given them to her before.

As she sat opposite to me at dinner she looked lovely. Round that graceful throat the brilliants sparkled like water. The simile was not a happy one: it suggested tears, and reminded me how many had been shed, caused by me, and on her account, in this very room. A voice rose in my heart that the queenly splendour which adorned my wife was the gift of that mother I had so outraged and pained, and was bestowed by me on the one woman she would have rejected as a daughter. The costly heritage I had derived from her I shared with one she distrusted and despised. At that moment I looked towards Marian; she was bending down, with sparkling eyes and kindling cheek, and listening to the flattering speeches of Lord Lascelles. She had invited him in such a manner that I could make no objection. Something in her attitude, in the curves of her lips as she smiled, carried me back to the days long ago, days of the Grange, before her marriage with Warburton. I shuddered; I answered absently to persons who were speaking to me; I made the most

obvious blunders. People began to look surprised, and in spite of the proverbial inexpressiveness of worldly faces, I caught an expression on some, as I turned my eyes from the head of the table, which stung me.

"Jealous, by ——."

I fancied this exclamation hissed into my ears; I began to talk and laugh vehemently, but there was disquiet within me. My laugh was so loud that it served to attract Marian, who looked at me with surprise, and then coldly and slowly averted her eyes.

After the dinner there was a ball. Lascelles and Marian opened it. Marian and I met once in the course of the evening.

"What is the matter, Hubert; are you not well, or only cross?"

"Not very well," I replied.

"It is very hot, I am not surprised—I feel half suffocated myself, and far from well."

She left me, and glided back to the dancers. Where was the quick sympathy of old? I threw myself on a chair in the library, lost in a bitter reverie. The drawer in which I had placed the case and letter was open, I mechanically took out

the letter; it was in my mother's hand. I trembled as I read it.

"My beloved Hubert, how strange it is to think that when you receive this letter the hand that wrote it will be dust. I rise from my grave, my dearest, to bless you. The bitterness of death was over when I held your hand for the last time. You have thought my silence unforgiving —would it not rather have proved alienation, and have been a sacrilege, to alter the free and unconstrained intercourse of spirit which had once subsisted between us, to the superficial communion which was the tone you had adopted? Best to roll the stone on the sepulchre till the day of the resurrection. That day will come. I can wait for it; I know that hereafter you will know my heart. We are all unjust to one another: I may have misjudged you, but my judgment of you never affected my love for you. You misunderstood me and ceased to love me; but you will love me once more, my son. I look back on my girlish, my married, my widowed life, and I see I have been deprived of most of the blessings which are given to other women; but

I had one gift, the gift of loving you, Hubert, with an entire and perfect love. When you are a parent you will understand me. You have accused me of jealousy. God forgive you; I was jealous of your honour, of your truth, of your happiness, which all seemed to me perilled by the course of life on which you had entered. What can be the result of selfishness united to selfishness, falseness to falseness, ingratitude to ingratitude? There is a lucidity in a mother's apprehension. I know that you are not loved as you love. I know also that you love, not with the best, but with the worst part of your nature, and therefore, that your love is mortal and ephemeral. That it has placed you in antagonism to me is my bitter, but deserved chastisement. My idolatrous affection for you has fostered your selfishness, it is right that I should suffer by that selfishness. I am resigned, I submit, but you too, dearest, will suffer; would that, at any cost to myself, I could shield you. Be firm, be unselfish, be sincere. Truth, fortitude, and love carry us through all trials victoriously. I do not pray for any blessing chosen by myself for you. I hold the cross between my hands, and

say for you as for myself, God's will be done!

"MABEL SPENCER."

Before I reached the end of this letter my eyes were filled with tears. Yes, she was avenged, and on the spot where I had been so careless, so ungrateful, so cruel—she was avenged. I would have given all that remained to me of life but to have held once more the hand I had cast away. I snatched the candle from the table and held it up before her picture, which was in the room—an old portrait taken when she was young, but with the intense look about the eyes which was her characteristic. The eyes were unanswering now; the mouth would never smile upon me again. I sat down again. I heard steps and extinguished the light, for I did not wish to be intruded upon, but the steps were in the conservatory. Through the distant sound of the music in the saloon the words I had just read rang as a knell to my ears—"Selfishness to selfishness, falsehood to falsehood, ingratitude to ingratitude." I went to the window which opened into the conservatory, for I was faint and dizzy. The steps approached, and through the moonlit vista of

shrubs and exotics I saw a gleam of some shining dress.

"Are you better?" said a voice I did not at once recognise.

"Yes, much better,—it was only the heat," answered the rich soft tones of Marian—of my wife.

"I will sit down here, Lord Lascelles; then I must return, for I shall be missed—I do not know where Hubert is."

I heard a muttered exclamation, and an expletive added to the name of Hubert, and I recognised Lord Lascelles' voice.

He continued:

"Where in the ——'s name is he? It is of consequence to him to show himself, I know, as this assembly is a sort of touchstone for his election. But where can he be?"

"He said something about not being very well."

"I cannot imagine Spencer suffering from the ordinary ills of mortality."

"Why not?"

"I should not, were I in his place."

"I do not understand you."

"No matter. Do not move, I beseech you; you are not rested—let us stay, it is so pleasant here—almost an Italian atmosphere; these orange-flowers—those roses—"

"Ah, do not speak of Italy—the name fills me with sad memories and yearning regrets. It was such a favourite dream of mine that Italy should be my home one day; but dreams are never realised—"

"Mine are transcended. I once dreamed of a face—a form of a peculiar and enchanting type. I have seen a reality more exquisite than my dreams."

"You have been fortunate."

"Oh, Marian—forgive me, Mrs. Spencer."

"Lord Lascelles, I had better return to the drawing-room."

"Not before you say you forgive me."

"Foolish . . . What a perfect child you are."

"I am only three years younger than Spencer."

"Perhaps not, but those three years make a difference; besides, I am older than Spencer."

"Impossible!"

"It is true; when I consented to marry a man younger than myself I was not unmindful of the

risk, but I thought that in all marriages there are drawbacks, and a woman who is conscious that she has something to make up for, has a greater incentive to patience, gentleness, indulgence than others."

"Angel! who could be worthy of you?"

"All men flatter all women . . . but their wives; it is strange how this little ring robs us of our perfections. Till they are married men think we alone can make their happiness—afterwards they require a hundred adjuncts."

"I shall not be tried, for I shall never marry!"

"Never marry?"

"No; all I seek from life is friendship; I have no mother, no sister; a woman who would condescend to let me be her friend would never repent it—will you let me be yours?"

"It is a great blessing to have a friend. In life there are a thousand trifles, little trials, slight sorrows we do not like to disturb those who love us most with, and yet which need assistance and sympathy. Many men adore women, but their adoration is useless in the daily wants of life. If I were in danger I would rush to Hubert for protection; but if a thorn scratched me, however

painful, he would only laugh at me. He often thinks me, as I daresay I am, foolishly sensitive: he does not often comprehend me."

"I understand, for I am of that nature myself. I can offer you sympathy, and I can understand you from never having been understood myself. Let me be your friend, dear—Mrs. Spencer."

"Well, we will be very good friends, and to seal the compact of our friendship, let us return to the ball-room and work for the popularity of the new member."

"Spencer shall not complain of my lukewarmness in his cause. I will move heaven and earth, the highest and the lowest powers that be, to serve him, and he shall be M.P. in six weeks."

The speakers rose and moved back to the rooms. I had heard as one spell-bound. I had never moved.

"The old sweet tale," as Heine says, "so sweet, so sad——" My thoughts were confused; so had I spoken to her, so had I felt when she was Warburton's wife—"falsehood to falsehood." In the darkness I felt my mother's eyes were fixed piercingly on me, and the strangely menacing

aspect of Veronica, standing as I had seen her on that last fatal day, recurred to me.

What do I feel?—am I jealous—angry—scornful? I laugh, laugh with a bitterness which is almost convulsive, and then I pause. Is that game to be played with me—and yet what was it that disturbed me? Am I not *sure* of Marian's virtue? O God!

CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning a large party assembled at the breakfast-table. Marian, instead of breakfasting as usual in her own room, was in her place amongst us. I looked at her, and, for the first time since I had known her, observed her as a stranger might have done. I seemed divested, as by some sudden lucidity, of the magnetic "rapport," so to speak, between us.

She wore a piece of lace over her head, knotted under the chin with some rose-coloured ribbon. She was certainly and incontestably beautiful! Why did that beauty excite something resentful in me?—a passionate and indignant vindictiveness, as if some weapon was upheld against me by an enemy.

Her little Nina, who had grown into a bewitching tiny coquette of nine years old, was seated

near her. Lord Lascelles was playing with the child as if he saw no one else, not even its mother. The conversation at my end of the table turned on the ensuing election, and the prospects of the county. With an effort I bent my mind to attention, and took part in it. My friends seemed surprised that a man who had lived so long abroad, who had a certain loose foreign guise in his dress and habits, knew so much, not only of the ins and outs of English politics generally, but was versed in many intimate details of the tangled web of party traditions at Speynings. I rose immediately in their estimation, and the conversation became general and animated. Some of the ladies offered themselves to aid us in our electioneering expeditions, and there was a general cry—

"We must enlist you, Mrs. Spencer."

Marian laughed and shook her head.

"You have my best wishes, as you may suppose, Hubert, but I am afraid I shall not be of much use. I am so foolishly shy on occasions of that kind, that I shall do more harm than good. The people would think me proud while I was simply awkward."

She blushed as she spoke.

I saw Lord Lascelles leave off whispering to Nina and listen to her. I knew how he would admire such graceful feminine timidity. I had a torturing intuition of all he would feel. What a wretched sensation this umbra of myself—this mocking tautology of all I had undergone in the Warburton era—gave me.

At last the ladies rose, and we men sat somewhat longer over our cold coffee, newspapers, and cigars. Lord Lascelles sat silent, cutting with his knife various indentations on some bread on his plate, lost in thought.

The horses were ordered, and we all went to prepare for a round of calls, to test as it were the pulse of the place, to ascertain our strength and our weakness,—to discriminate between our allies and our opponents.

Before I left, faithful to long habit, I ran in to Marian's boudoir to bid her good-bye (it was at the opposite side of the house from the entrance), but she was not there. I crossed the hall and found all my friends—Lascelles included—mounted.

As we passed the house Marian stood at the window of the library with Nina at her side.

She kissed her hand to me as we rode by. It was as pretty a picture as one might wish to see of the lady of the castle sending out her lord on some chivalric and perilous adventure.

"Why are you punishing that poor brute so unmercifully, Spencer?" said Mr. Mannering, a very old friend of my mother's, who rode beside me. "You stuck your spurs into the poor jade as if you had some refractory 'Blue' on hand."

I smiled, and Mr. Mannering did not see that I smiled in scorn at myself. I was an idiot to be so moved—a coward to be so irritable—about what? The experience of the irrevocable past gave me foregone conclusions, which I used to poison the present.

I was ashamed of myself. Was I a prey to that most humiliating of pangs a man may endure, jealousy of a woman he does not esteem? Mr. Mannering here rode up and asked me if it would not be advisable to call at the Rectory. Mr. Maynard was a popular man, an exemplary clergyman—"not a meddling parson"—and connected with me by marriage. He would be a most useful ally.

We turned our horses' heads, and rode through

the little wood which divided the glebe land from the park, and leaving the horses to the grooms, entered.

Mr. Maynard was alone in his study, and our interview was most satisfactory. He knew most of his parishioners intimately. He offered to make out a list, which he thought might be useful to me. While he was writing it, he proposed we should go into the drawing-room and see his wife.

My conscience smote me at this zealous good-nature, for I had never been especially civil to Maynard. His wife was Marian's sister, and that circumstance, which should have drawn us together, had divided us; there had never been any congeniality between Marian and Nora, and I had insensibly acquiesced in Marian's tone. Maynard himself was a gentlemanly, scholarly fellow—certainly the very reverse of a "meddling parson," and he had accepted with dignified indifference the indirect ostracism to which he had been subjected.

I was not, therefore, prepared for the instant aid he proffered me, and the sincere interest which I saw he took in my success.

We found Nora alone. She was not so cordial in her reception of us as her husband had been. Nora's manner had always been impulsive and somewhat abrupt. The very softness of her sister seemed to goad her into a kind of perverse combativeness, but her marriage had improved and refined her. To me, of late, however, she had always been cold and distant. Fanny was not visible, but a chair drawn to the table near some writing implements seemed to have been only just vacated. Since our last interview I had never by any chance seen Fanny near enough to address her. I had a sore, uncomfortable feeling at my heart with regard to her. It seemed that the only person who judged me fairly, and so judging, condemned me, was she, my mother's protégée—she, the playmate of my childhood—she, the companion and friend of my youth!

My mother's dying words were full of forgiveness and tenderness; but while Fanny remained estranged, the forgiveness did not seem complete and entire; and yet how could I retrace the steps which had divided us.

On the very few occasions on which Mr. and Mrs. Maynard had visited us, they had always

been alone; and the two or three times we had dined with them Fanny was absent. She and Marian had never met since the latter's marriage.

I was thinking of these things while Mannering and the others were talking to Nora, and then, finding myself unnoticed, I slipped back to the library to ask some more questions of Maynard.

To my surprise I round Fanny standing beside him, reminding him of names, and adding comments, which revived apparently his recollection of them, while he wrote them down. Their backs were to me, and they did not see me enter; but she was speaking with a good deal of earnestness and animation. I went up to her. "I am so glad to see you once more, and I thank you from my heart." My voice faltered in spite of myself.

"If you mean for sending you that—that packet—I ought to apologise rather for not sending it earlier. The reason of the delay was first my own absence from Speynings for many months after your marriage, and then some difficulties in receiving it from the persons who had taken care of it during my absence."

She spoke coldly and formally. It was still

war, then. I was hurt. I bowed in silence, and turned away.

"Thanks, Maynard: you have been really most kind."

"Why, it is a *catalogue raisonné*, with a vengeance," said Mannering, looking over the list, as he entered. "I see our way clearly now. How surprised these good yeomen would be to know how thoroughly you had read them, Maynard! 'A chiel's amang ye takin' notes,' and all that sort of thing, eh?"

He and the others were introduced to Fanny; and then, after many apologies to Maynard for our wholesale incursion, and thanks for his valuable assistance, we took leave. I shook hands almost warmly with him, but I merely bent in acknowledgment of Fanny's all but scornful salute.

How expressive was her face, I thought, of contempt and aversion. How could she but despise me! This I was compelled to avow to myself.

There was a good deal of conversation among the others, but I rode on silently.

The scenes I had witnessed, or rather the words I had overheard the night before, were like a stone dropped into a pool. Where it had broken

the surface, a series of ever-widening circles testified the disturbance, and continued it. So many remembrances were evoked, which brought with them so much of sickening resemblance of the feelings which Lord Lascelles had avowed, that, combined with the impatience of pain engendered by long selfishness, I was really on a moral rack. A spark left to smoulder has often caused a conflagration, and I shrunk, with a sense of boding ill, from these retrospections, from the evil they aroused, from the still greater evil they might create. But I was forced to command myself. I obliged myself to talk and jest, and tried thus to exorcise the evil spirit.

We did a good deal of business, had luncheon at a most friendly farmer's, and we obtained golden opinions from all. I found to my surprise I was a popular man.

"Wall, our young Squoire looks puny and white loike; but he's jest real English at heart, for all that. What say you, Bill? And Mr. Mannering is a foine one, to be sure."

Such exclamations would sometimes reach us, and amuse us.

Towards sunset we took the road towards

Speynings, tired and hoarse with our exertions. Lord Lascelles had been most strenuous in talking, laughing, joking, and had certainly been of great assistance; but there was an absent air about him when we were all riding together, which I could not fail to notice.

"I have just been thinking, Spencer," said the gay, good-humoured Mannering, "that you enjoy a positive monopoly of beauty at Speynings. It is not fair at all to the rest of England. First, there is Mrs. Spencer. Consider that I cry 'chapeau bas' when I name her. Then, Mrs. Maynard, who has the blackest hair, parted on the whitest forehead I have ever seen in woman. Then, lastly—by no means least—Miss Egerton: what a fine young woman!"

"Not exactly a fine young woman, Mannering; she is so very small."

"Yes, I know she is; but there is a manner, a pose of the head, nevertheless, that is very fine. There is something so frank and true in her expression; and you remember those lines,

> 'And truth might for its mirror hold
> That eye of matchless blue.'"

"No."

"I dare say not; Scott is not appreciated as he was in my days. Well, as I said before, it isn't fair; and were I a younger man, I think I should try to carry off the single lady at all events. What say you, Lascelles?"

"I beg your pardon; I did not hear you. What were you talking about?"

"Miss Egerton's beauty."

"Ah!"

Mannering looked at him with surprise at the listless "Ah!" and then shrugged his shoulders, and muttering something which sounded like "soft in the head," went on with me.

We were now on the grounds of Speynings, and saw that some of the ladies had come out to meet us. We had to undergo a storm of questioning and congratulation and expostulation before we were allowed to dismount. At last we did so, and I went in. I did not see Marian. I was told she and Nina were on the terrace.

I was glad to be alone for a few minutes. I threw myself on a chair, and buried my face in my hands. I had been interested and amused with my morning's work while I was employed in it; but now I thought not of ambition and its

prospects; the bitter taste of the Dead Sea fruit was making itself felt; and, in the reaction, after work, its acrid flavour was perceptible and nauseous. To the hardest man there is a pang in the conviction that there is no love in his life. Very subtly and imperceptibly had I acquired this knowledge; but it was there. As I sat brooding over the consciousness, I heard sounds of merriment on the terrace.

In the library, where I was sitting, a large window, or rather glass door, communicated with a flight of steps which led to the terrace. Half mechanically I went towards it, glad to escape from myself.

A good many of the party were assembled there, and Nina was running about, flashing in and out among them, like a bright-coloured butterfly, so gay was her dress, so light her step. Marian was there too, leaning against the balustrade of the terrace, and bending over to feed a peacock below. The bird was a magnificent one, and wheeled about in the most stately manner, the rays of the setting sun glittering on his plumage and crested head with a most dazzling effect. Marian's figure was grace itself as she

thus stood, with the royal bird following every motion of her white hand. I could see her distinctly from where I was; and I saw Lord Lascelles, with all the fatigue and ennui off his face, standing beside her, conversing with her.

Mannering was not many yards off, talking to the others, and there was nothing which the most jealous or suspicious husband could have the hardihood to cavil at. Yet I clenched my hands, and there was a curse at my heart, if not on my lips, as I turned abruptly away.

The indolent nonchalance of Marian's attitude was so familiar to me: it was thus she allowed the poor fool whom her beauty had bewitched to gaze upon it with supreme indifference as to the result. Had any one warned her, she would have answered, "Why blame me that I am fair?" and with the same inexorable logic as Vittoria Corambona she would have argued:

> So may you blame some fair and crystal river,
> For that some melancholic distracted man
> Hath drown'd himself in't.

But I started at myself, as these lines rose to my mind. Did I place on the same evil equality the beauty I had so worshipped, and the baleful fascinations of "the White Devil?"

If, as Stendahl tells us, Love is mere crystallisation, the process through which the poor, bare twig is invested with its glittering jewels and exquisite form, is not more instantaneous than that which dissolves the charm and reduces it to its naked insignificance — in some cases, to its repulsive worthlessness.

But after all this may be folly, I thought. I am getting morbid. That letter unhinged me, and poisoned my interpretation of Marian's words to Lascelles. He may admire her, as all must; but let me be fair, and give her the credit of having more taste and good sense than to distinguish a person who has nothing but the handle to his name to make him remarkable. Without vanity, I may flatter myself that in all else I am his equal, if not superior. I cannot think so ill of her judgment as not to be aware of this.

Alas! was I yielding to the Warburtonian delusions? Into what abysmal depths of blind conceit is it allotted to husbands always to fall! How easily we forget that in all matters of mere flirtation the status of husband is, *per se*, a disadvantage, and that to a coquette there is a more racy flavour in the admiration of the veriest fool

than in the legitimate homage of the man who has bestowed on her his name. However, I tried to rouse myself. I made a resolution not to be oppressed by shadows, but to prove myself a man who would not delude himself, or allow others to deceive him. There might have been something in my own behaviour lately which had insensibly chilled Marian. It should be amended. A certain kind of desperation gave me courage. It was, after all, an overwhelming sorrow to see the idol to which so many costly oblations had been offered, crumbling into the dust. There was pain in every good and in every evil fibre of my nature at witnessing its fall, and I would save it if I could.

That day, at dinner, I made an effort to be more cheerful than usual. I was usually a very silent person, but I now exerted myself, and was as animated and brilliant as Mannering. We were all merry, with the exception of Lascelles, who cut a poor figure amongst us, leaning back in his chair, stroking his moustache.

Marian joined in the conversation, and appeared amused by it.

Mannering was praising extravagantly the beauty of her sister.

"Yes. Nora is very handsome, and yet I remember, when a child, my poor mother was in despair about her personal appearance. She was very dark, the only one of us who *was* dark, and I believe the nurses thought she must be a changeling. But it was quite the case of the ugly duckling. It was marvellous how she improved as she grew up, till she was at last always recognised as the beauty of the Comptons."

"Her colouring is wonderful, the very red lips, the clear paleness of the cheek, and the jet black hair."

"Yes; and it is rare in England, where the hair, eyes, and skin are rather in harmony than in abrupt contrast."

These words were very simply, gently said, but they did not enhance the beauty they spoke of.

"And by way of showing how varied is beauty, there is Miss Egerton, whose face and form are in so different a type."

"Yes; Miss Egerton is the perfection of prettiness. She always reminds me of a shepherdess on Sèvres china, so delicate and mignonne."

"Not exactly, Mrs. Spencer; there is more mind in her face, more character, and, above all,

more will. Watteau's shepherdesses are all roses and hoops."

"Well, I should say, dressed in that style, there would be a resemblance. At all events, nothing can be prettier than she is."

Again—was it the tone, or what subtle meaning was there in the words that was antagonistic to a favourable impression. In spite of myself, I answered her with some asperity:

"Fanny's beauty is not only undeniable, but it is singularly expressive of herself. That limpid purity of complexion, and that exquisite regularity of outline, are symbolical, I think, of great innocence of heart, and an inexpressible genuineness, if I may so term it, of character."

"I quite agree with you, Spencer," said Mannering.

"And so do I," said Marian; "it is, as I said before, consummate prettiness." And with a smile which circled the whole table, but which rested, I fancied, for a moment on Lascelles, she rose and left the room.

We drew our chairs closer after the ladies had left the room, and resumed our political conversation. I threw myself into it with an ardour and zeal which quite delighted my immediate partisans. Some of the party, however, slipped away,

and at last, none but those more immediately concerned, were left. We arranged our plans for the next few days, and drew up an address. While thus occupied, a letter was brought into me. It was from Maynard. He told me that the contest would be a sharp one, the other candidate was already in the field, and we must bestir ourselves. He mentioned some voters living in an outlying farm at some distance whom he thought we had better sound as early as possible. The letter was most friendly. We determined to set off the next morning, Mannering and I alone, and then we adjourned to the drawing-room.

Tea had long been over, and we had heard music. We reached the door in time to hear Lord Lascelles conclude a masterly prelude, and then in a mellow, cultivated tenor sing the following love-song:

Heart to heart, and lip to lip,
Bend thine eyes on mine!
Let me feel thy lashes sweep
With their curve divine,
O'er thy cheek—o'er thy cheek—and mine.

Let me feel thy bosom's throbbing:
Start not, child, at mine!
Wouldst thou hush its bitter sobbing,
Soothe this heart of mine?—
Let it break—let it break—'gainst thine!

Closer, closer, let thy breath,
  Balmy vapour, blend with mine;
Thus united, pitying Death
  Pauses over mine—
Merged, absorbed—merged, absorbed—in thine.

Loose thy hair in glittering fold,
  Angelwise o'er mine—
Let the mingled black and gold
  (Light and shade) entwine,
Like thy fate—like thy fate—and mine!

Guiltless *now* our fond caresses,
  Thou art wholly mine!
Death anoints the brow he presses,
  And the shining sign
Seals me his—seals me his—and thine!

It was a beautiful, passionate air, and he sang it with an expression which gave force to his words.

Some of the ladies whispered together behind their fans.

"*Tant soit peu leste,*" said one man into Mannering's ear.

Mannering shrugged his shoulders, and touched his forehead significantly.

"Something wrong there, or here," he said, tapping his own broad chest.

And among the loose sheets of music on the piano I saw Mannering take up the following song, adapted to an old air:—

I.

If to love her be dishonour,
  I am worthy of the blame;
For I knew, ere I had won her,
  Fools had jested with her name.
Well I know the righteous world
  Holds for one like her no place;
Oft I hear the curses hurled
  At that fair and fatal face.

II.

Therefore to my heart I hold her,
  Sheltered from rebuke and scorn;
Therefore in my arms I fold her,
  Bird! with wing all soiled and torn.
Sunshine bleaches foulest stains;
  Love shall wipe out life's disgrace;
Not a shame her past retains,
  Sealed from all in my embrace.

III.

Dark, deep mines yield golden treasures,
  Vainly sought in bowers above;
Judge her not by your false measures,
  Reach the stature of my love.
Raised above the dull earth's scorn,
  Ransomed from its guilt and fears,
Soon to Love and Truth new born,
  She will wipe away all tears.

IV.

Love, like death, unlocks the portal
  Through which souls redeeméd go,
And the mortal to immortal
  Passes with transfigured brow.
Past from present, I dissever,
  Robed by love in vesture white;
Sainted, saved, she lives for ever,
  Pure and holy in my sight.

Mannering put it down with a curious smile. As he looked up he met Marian's searching eyes.

"Somewhat halting in the measure, Mrs. Spencer," he said, "and *very* one-sided as to meaning."

"And not at all suited to the music," she said, calmly, looking at the song. "Our language is sadly unmusical."

She glided away, and I saw that he exonerated her at once from any complicity with the author of the song.

After a few minutes Marian looked earnestly towards the piano, and when the player, after a pause, began some wild march, an almost imperceptible smile passed over her lips.

I noticed, however, that during his stay at Speynings, Lascelles never sang again, during the evenings. I sometimes heard him in the morning, when the audience was entirely feminine.

To a person so morbidly self-conscious as I was, it was not strange that when I went down-stairs again, to write some letters ere I went to bed, I thought over the feelings which the day had called forth; but through all and over all, was the wonder, that with the grief, with the pain, with

the resentment, there came no soft, relenting, yearning feelings of love. Love was dead. Its mermaid caves, its siren halls, its nereid songs were over, and dark amidst the waves of life rose the new earth which had been slowly amassed beneath the waters. Vague suspicion, accusing memories, slow experience, had dropped their unhallowed seed, till the whole had accumulated into one stratum of alienation.

But though love was dead, I avowed myself jealous. There is a jealousy which is of love, there is a jealousy which is of pride. *I knew Marian.* I knew that what the world called honour was safe; but I was not prepared to go through a drama similar to that of the Grange and of Vienna; but with the parts changed. Lascelles must go, and it would not be my fault if he returned.

Before I left the library I took out my mother's letter from the drawer in which I had placed it, and unlocking an old desk of hers, which contained some of her papers, I touched the spring of a secret drawer in which I intended to place it. The drawer was empty, with the exception of an ornament which I had been accustomed to see

her wear, and which she must have placed there with her own hands, and had afterwards forgotten. It was a small diamond cross. The diamonds were very fine, and set in dark blue enamel. On a label attached to the cross were the words:

"For Fanny."

I was rejoiced at this. I was glad that Fanny should possess what she must value as having belonged to and been almost identified with one she so loved, and I was more than glad that Marian would never wear it. I determined to take it, or send it to the Rectory the next day.

CHAPTER VII.

THE next morning Mannering and I set off directly after breakfast. Lascelles made an effort to join us, but we told him it was unnecessary, and that we felt that with a house full of young ladies, it was very selfish to occupy with sordid political cares the "likeliest man among us."

I do not think he was much disappointed. He wished to keep honestly to his bargain to work for the future member, but was not sorry to be off duty sometimes. As we galloped along, we saw, to our astonishment, Maynard, his wife, and Fanny, riding in the same direction. Mannering immediately put his horse beside Fanny's, and I joined Maynard and his wife.

"After I wrote to you," said Maynard, "I found we were all in the humour to ride towards the

Combe this morning; and, not knowing whether my proposition to you would suit your other engagements, I resolved to strike while the iron was hot. Our combined forces will be quite a demonstration."

Nothing could be more cordial than Maynard. He talked to me of Italy, of Austria, of Paris, and I found him a man of great general information and of artistic as well as scholarly tastes. Nora never looked so well as on horseback, and was less reserved with me than usual. I heard Fanny behind us laughing at some of Mannering's sallies, and we all were in the mood for mirth and enjoyment, at least ostensibly.

I was resolved that none should guess what I felt on some subjects. Besides, I grasped at this new toy, this fresh ambition, with something of the feverish tenacity of a drowning man grasping at some straw for bare life. When we entered the farm-house which was our destination, I recognised to my surprise, in the wife of the farmer, an old housekeeper of my mother's. She was at Speynings when I left it to go to Vienna, and had nursed my mother in her last illness. Her face lighted up with pleasure as she recog-

nised Fanny and Nora, and they all disappeared together while we went to the kitchen.

The farmer was a surly kind of man. He was disposed to be disputatious, too; one of those men who had a fuddled kind of notion over his pipes and beer, that but for the watchfulness of such as he, England would be the prey of a "bloated aristocracy." But like many others of his type, it was curious to see how all his opinions had been originated by his wife, and were held in deference to her. "My good dame" was quoted perpetually, and with the respect due to an oracle.

We should have found it difficult, I suspect, to do much with him, as all his professions of faith were diametrically opposite to ours, when his wife and the two ladies returned.

She had evidently been far more easy to influence, or had been better managed, for she walked straight up to her husband, and (by a series of nudges, and whispers, and contradictions, flatly interrupting him when he attempted an expostulation, and, twisting his words till he remained open-mouthed at their new meanings) completely upset his whole line of argument, and

made him believe he was pledged to ours. It was very curious to look at them. This small, spare, peaky woman, whom he could have crushed between finger and thumb, evidently ruled most mercilessly the great, brawny demagogue. I was no longer surprised at his confused notions — these sudden whirls of change, must have kept up a chronic state of up-side-down in his brain.

When we left, I went up to her and asked her how she was, and told her I had recognised her. She instantly became radiant, and dropped a low curtesy. I asked her why she never came to see the old place?

She looked rather primly at Fanny.

"I shall be very glad if you would come," I added, "you and Speynings ought not to be such strangers."

She looked puzzled, and muttered something I did not hear.

When in the saddle again, we divided as we had done before, only that Nora, after a time, cantered on with Mannering and Fanny.

Maynard and I dropped behind, and in the intervals of our calls on other voters, we went on with a discussion we had commenced, and a

theory he was expounding about the allegory contained in the Sacred and Profane Love of Titian.

I was much interested, for, to say truth, speculations of this kind were much more congenial to me, than the business I was at present engaged in. Maynard was pleased, as we all are, when we get on a hobby and have met with sympathy. We were so absorbed that we did not notice the gathering clouds in the sky, and the large drops of rain which began to fall. The distant rumbling of thunder roused us as from a dream.

We were now all gathered together, we placed our horses' heads side by side, as in such a predicament people always do, and then we hastened on, purposing to leave the Maynards at the Rectory, and to proceed ourselves.

By the time, however, we did arrive at the Rectory the rain was falling in such torrents that the hospitable Maynard would not hear of our going further. We must wait till the storm was over.

Meanwhile we must dine with him. He seemed so bent upon it, that, after some little hesitation, we consented.

We caught that amphibious animal, the post-

man, who fortunately left the letters at the Rectory before he went on to the Hall, and sent a message by him that we were detained, and that they must not wait for us for dinner.

We dried ourselves as best we might, and while Mannering went to the dressing-room to array himself in some of Maynard's garments, the rector and I continued our conversation in his study.

I took an opportunity, however, of giving him the little packet for Fanny, and asked him to give it her, and tell her what it was. We were interrupted just as he seemed about asking me some question, relative, I feared, to Fanny's estrangement from her dearest friend's son, and I was too glad to escape giving him an answer.

I went into the drawing-room, but listened for a moment to hear if Mannering was there. I felt a reluctance to enter, if Fanny and Nora were alone, when, with the proverbial good luck of listeners, I caught the following words spoken by Fanny. Her raised voice was the sign of emotion.

"It is quite from a different cause, Nora, I assure you; nothing can alter the dislike and contempt I feel for *him;* but I helped him for his mother's sake."

"Here, Spencer," called out Mannering, "come here and try and make yourself presentable. I am rather proud of my success."

We did not meet till dinner, and then I saw that Maynard must have given the packet to Fanny, for her eyes looked as if she had been crying, and her face had lost the set and resolute look it usually wore when I was present. Once during dinner, Mannering said:

"I cannot tell you, Spencer, how glad I am that you take so kindly to these electioneering struggles. I never thought it was *in* you, with your half-foreign education and long residence abroad. What pleasure it would have given my dear friend, your mother, could she have lived to see her son the member for G——. She had the clearest brains, and the strongest wish to use brains, time, influence, heart, for others, of any woman, or man, I may add, that I ever knew."

It was fortunate that Mannering's speech was long. Involuntarily I raised my eyes, and met those of Fanny, who sat opposite to me. She blushed painfully. I felt I turned livid.

After dinner there was music. Maynard was obliged to leave us. Nora and Fanny played and

sang to Mannering, who said he wanted to get the Lascellian music out of his head. They asked him what he meant, but he refused to gratify them, and only said that it was distasteful to him.

I leant my elbow on the mantel-piece, and stood in deep, sad thought. How everywhere I turned I evoked some memory, or recalled some association, which was painful. By this deep, deep pain, which every moment was sinking deeper and deeper into my heart, was I paying all those long arrears of heartless indifference and of selfish neglect. It seemed to me that those words of Mannering's blighted all the desire that I had for success in this new object of effort.

While I thus stood quite absorbed and deaf to what was going on around me, Fanny came to me. Her sister was singing to Mannering, who was quite enchanted with her voice, and she had left them.

"I come to thank you for your kindness," she said.

"I do not deserve your thanks."

"For this remembrance of my dearest."

She stopped, and I saw the tears in her eyes.

"It's no act of mine—she had written your name on it——"

"Was it not with the others——"

"No. I found it in a desk which I had not yet opened. I was glad to find that she had destined it where I myself should have wished, but not dared to offer it."

"Thank you. It is so identified with her (you know she always wore it) that it is very dear and precious to me."

"And no one ought or should have had it but you, whom she loved so dearly, and who so loved her."

Fanny looked at me with something of a puzzled, inquiring air. There are tones which betray so much more than the words. Did mine betray some of my unavailing repentance?

I controlled myself, however; and as she was turning away said to her:

"When I first returned from abroad, Maynard told me of certain charities which she had wished to initiate. At the time I neglected them, but now, if it were possible, I should like to fulfil those wishes of hers. Not to make myself popular, Miss Egerton," I said, for there was some-

thing in the half-surprise, half-doubt of her look, which stung me, "I could not attend to them till after the election has been decided; but then——"

"I beg your pardon: again let me thank you for this unexpected kindness."

"Again: why should it be unexpected, Miss Egerton? Could I have possibly done otherwise?"

"The brilliants are so valuable; and, indeed, at first I thought they had formed part of the set which I sent; I thought you would not have separated them."

"It was, perhaps, natural for you to think so," I answered, weariedly, for I was thoroughly humbled and dispirited. "One is too apt to forget how low a place one holds in the opinion of some persons, and still more that we ourselves only are to blame for it."

Fanny looked at me with something of the steadfast intentness which had so often struck me in my mother's looks. It was not surprising that she had acquired a resemblance to her. She turned from me and rejoined her friend, and I did not speak to her again.

We left about ten o'clock, but on reaching Speynings I left Mannering to find his way to the drawing-room alone, and turned into the library.

I was ashamed of the momentary impulse which had exposed me to unnecessary humiliation. I was indignant also at the weakness, for there seemed to me to be a base desire of ingratiating myself with one who despised me, mingled with an honest wish to carry out the too-long neglected intentions of my mother.

"Let her despise me," I thought; "she cannot equal my own contempt for myself."

How I now longed for defeat in this present ambition of mine, which had been despoiled by Mannering's words of all its gilded promise. I had sought this escape from disappointment and satiety; and it was a miserable thought that, if successful, I should be congratulated on all sides as doing what had been most desired, by one, whose wishes during her life had never been studied by me. There are moments in life when a large and complete misfortune would be welcome; it would square the external circumstances with the utter despair of the inner being.

"My dear Hubert," said Marian, as she entered,

"what are you doing here by yourself? Mr. Mannering has been giving us the most glowing accounts of your day; but I must say, looking at you, that you do not bear him out—you look bored to the last extent. What is the matter?"

"I am tired—but I was coming up."

"You need not, for they are almost all gone to bed; I came down only to see you."

"Who are left?"

"Only one or two——"

"Lord Lascelles?"

"Yes;—why? Did you want to speak to him?"

"No."

There was a pause, and our eyes met. I turned away mine first. In hers was something of that stern, dominant, overbearing expression, with which it is said a sane person can control an insane one, or a human being master an animal. It was but a moment—but it was there.

"Good night, then; don't sit up all night."

And I heard the rustle of her soft satin dress along the passages. She did not return to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VIII.

It seemed that my evil wishes had called down their own accomplishment, for the next day news was brought us that a neighbouring gentleman, representing the same opinions as my own, was going to offer himself to the electors. My friends held a meeting, and, much to their mortification, I somewhat abruptly declared that I would not divide the votes on our side, and that I would not be put in nomination.

Mannering held up his hands at such Quixotic generosity, others were almost angry, but I was firm. I was accused of idleness, of caprice; Lascelles was especially indignant, and my wife seemed much disappointed, but I was not to be moved.

I saw that Marian watched me closely at this time. She scrutinised my words, and tried to

read my looks. She could not understand me. Whatever she might say, she felt secure of her power over me; she would not have believed that it was over, had any one insinuated such a thing, and yet I was evidently changed. She redoubled her airy fascinations, and all but two persons would have considered her a model of a devoted and loving wife. These two persons were Lascelles and myself. Lascelles considered her as an angelic, mismatched being, who strove to do her duty to an unsympathising, capricious brute of a husband who did not care a straw for her, and who did not understand all the exquisite refinement and poetry of her nature, and who could not therefore be loved by her; and I—I read her as one reads a book, and no mere lip-service would avail with me. Once or twice I saw she thought she had detected jealousy, and she was rejoiced. *That* could be controlled to her own purposes. Most of our friends had now left, and at last Lascelles found he had no excuse to linger, and took his departure. Mannering (who was to stay till the next day), Marian, and I, stood in the porch to see the last of the last detachment of our guests. Among these was Lascelles.

"So ends our pleasant time," said Marian, with a sigh.

"Yes, we have had a delightful visit," said Mannering; "what a pity it is over! but Spencer owes himself to the county, and the next time he shall not be allowed to slip through our fingers."

"Yes, most wives, I believe, feel, or affect to feel, a kind of jealousy of their husband's parliamentary duties; but I think Hubert would make a good member. He has both energy and persistence when roused, and he wants rousing——"

"He looks rather relieved, however, now, whether at being left at last alone with you, Mrs. Spencer, or at the absence of some of us, I cannot define. You really seemed glad to shake hands with that handsome fellow Lascelles, Spencer; wasn't it a fact now?"

"Very glad," I answered; "I do not wish to have Lascelles here again."

"Do you mean, Hubert, that you did not like a person who was devoted to you as Lord Lascelles was? I appeal to you, Mr. Mannering: could any one have worked harder than Lord Lascelles in Hubert's cause?—how very ungrateful men are——"

"To each other?—Yes, I am afraid so; but between ourselves, Mrs. Spencer, Hubert did not like the Lascellian muse, or music."

We all laughed, but I detected Marian's eyes exploring my face with keen and inquiring scrutiny. The next day we were left alone.

It is an old proverb that says, "Murder will out," that stones will not hide, the heavens will not cover it, the reeds will speak it, the walls will whisper it; but even truer is it of love. We *cannot* conceal its life, we *must* betray its death. And yet I can honestly say that I endeavoured to appear the same. Never since I had been married had I so sincerely tried to make Marian happy. No, it should not be my fault if she were not so. I did not dare to be capricious, self-absorbed, negligent; for the first time in my life I tried to rule myself. The ice was cracking so fast under my feet that one unguarded movement would plunge me into the depths below. I must needs be wary. I had never striven so hard in all outward acts to follow the old precept, "preferring another to oneself," and my success was—null.

Marian saw through it, and tried me hard. I could be gentle, attentive, kind; but how impos-

sible to simulate the feeling which had once been the motive power of my being I cannot describe. A garden which had once been a paradise of choice and fragrant flowers, transformed by some elemental convulsion into a yawning chasm, was not more different from the state of my heart then and now. And she?—how inexplicable are women! I was convinced that she did not love me, that she could not love any one; that her whole nature had been unnaturally forced in one direction to the serious detriment and impoverishment of all others; that that insatiable love of pleasing, which, of all passions, leaves most sterile the moral nature, had been like a leprosy eating into her very soul, and yet I saw clearly that she was striving to regain her power over me—but from what motive I could not define. She made use of her beauty, more dazzling in some respects at this period than I had ever seen it, as men use a falchion to cut down an enemy; she tried to rouse that she might sway, those base instincts in me which had always been so submissive to her; she was Protean in the changes she assumed; tender, sportive, impulsive, gay, melancholy by turns, and wore her softest semblance to

soothe, or her most *piquante* grace to excite, the passion, which she hoped yet existed, however palsied and wounded it had been.

She must have had a deep reliance on my weakness. There were times, I confess, when a sort of diseased simulacrum of former unholy fires, a galvanic appearance of vitality in the seared corpse of what had once been passion would be awakened; but there were moments of revulsion when my whole man rose against her fascinations and revolted from her charms, and I hated her. I acknowledged to myself it was hatred. But these were only intervals; the greater part of the time I was internally in a state of stagnant apathy, while externally I tried to do my best, so to indulge her wishes and yield to her desires, that she should not have reason to complain of me, or to give herself the excuse of an unhappy home, or an uncomplying husband to act the part of victim or martyr.

These were certainly the ghastliest and dreariest days of my life. Not a friendly star beamed upon me from any quarter. There was a mute duel *à l'outrance* between my wife and myself, and there was no chance of peace or of victory.

I held no divining rod by which I could have discovered the life-springs of Marian's nature. Mine was not love, it was passion, and passion has no power to exalt or redeem.

Lascelles' name had never been mentioned between us since the day he left. Marian might have thought he had dropt out of my remembrance, but for one fact. I knew he was in the neighbourhood, and we sometimes received invitations from the persons with whom he was staying, but these I invariably declined.

Marian never remonstrated, or noticed these refusals. She bided her time, and knew her man. He was subjugated thoroughly, and given but an opportunity, he would be at her feet again. Her tactics at this time inclined her rather to resume the influence she felt she had lost over me. It mortified her, I know, to the quick, to feel how completely she had lost, not, I dare swear, my affection, but that mystic and sensuous passion which had once made my whole being vibrate at her touch, her look, the turn of her head. Her mirror must have told her she had never been more lovely in certain respects than now; but she felt that the hind or the ploughboy who turned

to stare at her when they met her, appreciated her more than I did. Except in the courtesies to which I was scrupulous to adhere, she saw she had lost in my estimation the very *prestige* of her sex.

If she was mortified, I was wretched. I had compassed my desires and this was the end. But I must bear it, and make the best of it. Perhaps the schooling I now underwent was of use to me: it was a bitter but bracing tonic.

I never refused a wish of hers, and she sometimes seemed to defy me, so wild were her caprices, but nothing was withheld that could be obtained. I also tried to interest her in some of my own pursuits. Maynard often came to us now; Nora more seldom, for she never appeared to advantage in her sister's presence; but Maynard was pleased to renew our art-discussions; and then I had followed up the intentions I had avowed to Fanny, and had worked hard to institute those charities, and develop those improvements which had been so dear to my mother.

Fanny I had not seen again, but I felt that both she and Nora assisted me indirectly in the parish: I traced their work everywhere, not only in the actual schools and workhouses, but in the

change with which I was everywhere received among my poorer neighbours.

Though Marian had always been liberal-handed and good-natured, the shrewd villagers had long taken measure of her moral stature, and by some mysterious process of village-chatterings it had been known that "Madame Spencer," as they called my mother, had not wished her to be her son's wife. That son, too, was more like a "furriner than an Englishman, and had never lived in the old place till he could not help himself." I would match a real country cottager for pride and reserve, and a power of repelling, with any aristocrat in the world, and I had never felt the least at home with any one of them. But now the case was different, and with Maynard, or without him, I was welcome. At first Marian accompanied me; but when she saw I attended more to the persons I went to see, than to her, that it was the actual donations, and not the grace with which they were offered, that interested me, she desisted, and I went alone.

At last, I fancy, she not only became bored with this kind of life, but began to reflect seriously on the future. Life to Marian was admira-

tion, homage, adoration; how should she exist without it? And what was worse than to know that it was hers elsewhere, but that with me she was deprived of it? Her thoughts must often have reverted to Lascelles at this period. I think she must have reflected long, and counted the cost often before she finally made up her plan to break through our armed peace. I observed that after a certain period she left off her lively sallies, and especially when Maynard was present, she adopted a spiritless, languid demeanour, which told of failing health or sinking spirits. At first I was deceived, and offered to take her away for change of air, but she declined it.

At last, one day, after Maynard and Nora also had dined with us, and she and Nora having left the dining-room early had had an opportunity for a long conversation, I observed on joining them that Nora looked as if she had been much vexed, and that Marian bore the air of a person who has discovered a secret. When they were gone she called to me:

"Hubert, I wish to speak to you for a moment. Why does Miss Egerton never accompany Nora here—to her old home?"

I was dumb with astonishment.

"Will you tell me?" she asked again, lifting her large eyes to mine.

"How can I?" I stammered out.

"I have long observed an estrangement between you, and at first it seemed to me strange and unnatural, when I remembered you were once like brother and sister; but I was so happy then" (she sighed faintly), "that I was perhaps unmindful of others—but now I can detect a good deal to which I was then blind."

"Are you not happy now?"

"Do not speak of me—I want your answer."

"What answer can I give?"

"Am I the cause?"

I was silent.

"Were you unfaithful to her on my account? Does she hate *me* because she loved *you?*"

Her voice was like music.

"Good heavens! what do you mean?"

"I asked Nora; but as usual Nora is so childishly violent—"

"Marian, what mischief inspires you?"

"Poor Miss Egerton," said Marian, crossing her feet languidly and leaning back, "she might not

find my position so enviable after all. I think if a woman has been disappointed, the best cure for her would be to see, by some magic, into the heart of the man who has caused her sorrow, and of the woman who has supplanted her, when two years of their married life are over."

"I am sorry, if I understand you rightly, as regards ourselves, Marian; but it is my duty to tell you how entirely false is your first supposition. There is nothing Miss Egerton would consider as such an insult."

My voice was bitter and my cheek was flushed. I could picture to myself how Fanny would look at such an imputation. The scorn, the indignation in her eyes. Marian looked at me steadily.

"I may be right after all; but, however, it is no use to discuss the point—the evil is not to be remedied. I cannot oblige her or anyone else by doing what would be *de rigueur*, in a French novel, sublimely sacrificing myself, *à la* Jacques, —it's a pity, I confess."

She shook her head, and again suddenly raised her eyes to mine.

"If you only knew how absurdly you speak," I said, trying to master my passion, "you, who

have so much fine intuition, would cease; but remember this, I will not listen to such insinuations, and I forbid you—yes, I forbid you, to repeat them. Believe me, Marian," I said with a desperate revulsion of heart, "if *you* do not love me, no one else can or will—or has."

Her lips curled as in scorn, but before she had time to speak I left the room.

The thought that Nora should repeat to Fanny what Marian had said, was misery to me. It was a gratuitous insult to Fanny; and though I could have laughed at the folly of such an idea, it did not the less grate on me that it would surely evoke some very marked expression of dislike from Fanny. If she had felt the least inclined to soften her opinion of me, and to manifest my mother's forgiveness by her own, this would harden her against me at once.

The fruit of it was seen by Maynard's constant refusal, after this time, to come to us. I often met him, and he called on me, but the intimacy tha had sprung up between us was nipped in all its hospitable demonstrations. For the rest, our entire agreement upon matters connected with Speynings, and those still more congenial subjects

we had so often discussed, kept up our friendship —for it had become a friendship. I think he saw I was a very unhappy person, and as far as was in his power tried to support and console me.

But I was to drink still deeper of the poison distilled from my own follies and errors.

We never renewed this conversation; but I saw that it was Marian's fixed resolve to appear as if she had detected me in some infidelity. She was melancholy and silent when we were together, and remained alone as much as possible. She drove out with Nina, however, every day, and I am quire sure that wherever she went she must have left the impression of being an unhappy wife.

One tangible accusation can be proved false, but a general leaven of suspicion is invincible. So very beautiful a woman, surrounded with every advantage of position and fortune, could not appear, as she did, a prey to the most profound melancholy without exciting attention, and that the secret canker must be some vice in the husband was the inevitable conclusion at which persons arrived.

I was not aware of the extent of this till after-

wards. I saw that she refused all invitations, and with the exception of drives and morning calls rarely left the house; but when I was obliged, as I sometimes was, to go to some dinner-party alone, I could see by the inquiries with which I was assailed by some of the ladies, and some after-dinner jests of the men, that I was not very highly esteemed in my conjugal character.

All weak men have a desire to fly from present difficulties by change of place, and I often longed to put a world between us; but I conquered the wish. I would remain at my post. I had involved myself in many matters of business which required my personal attention, and besides my clear duty was not to leave Marian. I could now listen to the voice of duty and obey it, *quand même.*

The only person who, I think, saw the real state of the case was Maynard. A single-minded man of his sort could not, of course, fathom a character like Marian's, but he could see I was tried to the utmost by what he thought was only "fine lady caprice," but which was not the less trying to bear. He saw also that I was patient and anxious to please—one who would not be pleased.

I rarely saw the ladies when I went to see him; the announcement of Mr. Spencer was enough to send them out of the room if they were there. Once, however, while I was sitting there, Nora came in.

"I beg your pardon, do not let me disturb you," she said. "But what is the matter?" she added with almost a start; "are you not well?"

"Quite well, thank you."

Maynard looked at me through his glasses.

"Nonsense, Spencer, you cannot be well with such a face as that. I had not noticed it before."

Nora certainly looked at me with surprise. She evidently had been shocked; and I felt for the first time what a haggard, hopeless-looking wretch I must have appeared.

A few days afterwards, as I was returning from the Rectory, I met Nora and Fanny. They did not pass me as usual with a hasty word and salute, but relaxed their steps as I came up to them.

Fanny's veil had been thrown back, though she drew it over her face as I approached. Something in her wistful and compassionate glance sent my thoughts back to a very distant date. I

remembered the day when I met the two girls, and heard for the first time that Marian was betrothed to Warburton.

I remembered how Fanny had then put out her hand as if she would, in her girlish affection and kindness, have helped me to bear the blow under which I was staggering.

Then and now! Alas, a gulf divided me from that time, and yet, by the strange repetition of almost identical circumstances which one so often finds in one's fate, I stood perhaps in the same need as then; but now, no hand would or could be held out to me. I had placed myself where I was hemmed in by sorrow, yet cut off from sympathy.

Both men and women, if they have drawn a blank in the lottery of marriage, must bear the penalty alone. Feebly striking out the hands for aid in that conflict, is worse than idle.

These thoughts were filling my mind as I paused near these two.

"Are you better?" asked Nora.

"Thank you. I cannot acknowledge that I have been ill."

"You must not say that, when you look as you

do. And Marian, too, seems as if a change of air would do her good."

"Have you seen her?" I asked with surprise, for I had left Marian complaining of cold, in her dressing-room.

Nora turned scarlet.

"Yes, I saw her—I met her—just now, walking with Lord Lascelles."

I felt that I changed colour.

"We are late," interrupted Fanny; "good morning."

But though they hurried on, I distinguished through Fanny's veil the sad, mournful expression which I had noticed before. On reaching home I heard that Marian was still out.

She returned, however, soon afterwards, and came to me all blooming and animated in her velvet and furs, with Nina, a charming little rose-bud, by her side.

"I fancied a walk would dispel my fit of the blues," she said, "after you left, and I thought you would be sure to overtake us, for I had only just parted from Nora when you came up to her. I saw you as we looked back."

"Nora told me she had seen you."

She looked at me keenly for a minute.

"By-the-bye, here is Lord Lascelles' card; I find he has been here, for it was with some others and these letters in the hall. I wondered when we met him where he had been, for I know what a *bête noir* he is of yours, and thought how disagreeable his visit would be to you. He had just joined us when we met Nora."

What perfectly acted smiling indifference!

"You are quite right. I do not like him, and I shall not receive him if he repeats his visit."

"I differ entirely from you," she said with equal coolness. "I like him—he was one of my friends in Vienna, and to me he will always be welcome. I have never been accustomed to give up my friends to satisfy the caprice—or jealousy—of anyone."

"Jealousy!"

"I may flatter myself in using that word. Let me say caprice, then." She paused. "You know I never quarrelled with anyone in my life, therefore, Hubert, you will not surely oblige me to do so with you."

"There is no necessity for discussion," I said, "but in this case my will must rule yours."

"Have you any reason for disliking that poor young man, except that—"

"What!"

"He likes me with that friendly and cordial regard which our old acquaintance and *my* seniority so entirely authorise."

Her eyes sparkled with a dangerous lustre as she said this.

"It is no use, Marian," I said; "while I am master of this house Lascelles does not enter it."

"Do you understand how ridiculous you make yourself?"

"To that I am indifferent."

"Then this is your deliberate conclusion?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Come, Nina," she called to the child, "we must not disturb papa any longer; let us go up-stairs."

The child ran in from the terrace where she had been playing during our colloquy, and I was left alone.

If I expected that Marian would show any temper after this dialogue I was mistaken. She was languid, melancholy, indolent, but as soft and gentle as usual.

The little asperities and inequalities which I had noticed in her before the period of the election had passed away. I suppose the fact was, she no longer felt dull; she had plans to develop and a plot to arrange.

I seldom saw her but at meals, and then our conversation was brief and reserved. Poor little Nina, who was very fond of her "papa," as she had called me from the first, would sometimes run into the library and climb on my knee and try to make me smile, or flit about the room opening my portfolios and books; and calling out her childish remarks and comments, would sometimes beguile a sad and solitary hour, till her *bonne*, or sometimes Marian herself, would call her from the window for her morning walk on the terrace.

It was a miserable time; the waning year added a melancholy of its own to my own cheerless existence. It was one of those strange, moist, unhealthy, warm Novembers which are so peculiarly exhausting and yet irritating to the nerves. Everything seemed surcharged with gloom. Gloom present and gloom expectant. A hushed and solemn awe pervaded Nature, a foreboding of evil

from the elemental conflict of winter, and a preparation of the forces which were to be at first resistant and then victorious. Meanwhile the trees were stripped and black; the landscape was scarcely discernible through thin sheets of white mist; the sky was heavy with the amassed though unshed rain, and the warm steaming air saturated the earth with a penetrating and heavy vapour.

I went on my usual routine, but day by day I felt myself sinking. I dreaded illness, I dreaded fever, I dreaded delirium, which might betray my utter wretchedness. It would seem to many weak and unmanly to be so mentally and physically unstrung by what may appear an inadequate cause. I was conscious of this, and struggled with might and main to keep my footing, but it must be remembered that the failure with me was total, and deservedly so. I had more superstitious and feebler fibres in my nature than belong to most men, and the justice and fitness of suffering thus, in this spot where I had caused so much suffering, gave me pain—additional to the actual pain itself—that I had never been loved by Marian, and that I loved her no more.

One morning, as I was sitting writing, Nina came in as usual, and after a little talk with her, I deposited her by the glass-door of the terrace on the ground, with one of my old sketch-books, while I finished some letters.

I heard her chattering very volubly to herself, and then exclaim with delight — "Mamma! mamma!"

I turned and saw her looking at some drawing in the book. I rose in surprise to see what it was, when, on taking the book from her hand, I recognised an old sketch I had made at Venice of Veronica. I stood, with my back to the window still looking at it with a rush of bitter memories, till I heard her say: "Look, mamma! I found you in papa's book."

Marian had come to fetch her. She smiled, in a very Sphynx-like manner, as she held out her hand for the book.

"It isn't your mamma," I said, and was closing the book, but she persisted and took it from me.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"No one you know—a Venetian." I hesitated.

"Say no more. I was very indiscreet. A husband can take his wife's life and examine it

through and through—backwards and forwards; tear up a leaf here—cut out a part there; but to a wife, a husband's life is sealed; she must be ignorant of the past—she must shut her eyes to the present, and she must not dream of inquiring into the future. I am learning my duty. Come, Nina, you have plagued papa quite enough for one morning, come."

She stepped back as she spoke, and as the wan November sun lit her face there was a menace in her eyes which made her for a minute the image of Veronica as she stood by the lagoon on that last fatal evening.

CHAPTER IX.

THE next morning I (or rather Marian) received a letter from some very old friends of the Comptons, Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, inviting us to spend Christmas with them. I knew I could not leave Speynings myself at this time, but Marian, after she had read the letter, passed it across to me, and said:

"There is no reason why we should refuse this, is there?"

"*I* cannot leave Speynings at Christmas."

"But I can, I suppose. They have invited Harry for his holidays, and I think the change will do us all good. Speynings seems very unhealthy just now."

"Just as you like," I said, wearily.

"But you—"

"I must join you later."

I knew little of these Talbots personally, but

that they were very old friends of hers. Their house was one of the gayest in the neighbouring county. A baronial mansion in which the old Christmas traditions were kept up in the most rigorous manner. Marian had not seen them for years, and it seemed for a moment strange that they should so suddenly have remembered her, but it was only a fleeting thought. I did not pause to consider the why or wherefore, but was glad of any break which would in a measure modify the situation in which we were.

It was about three weeks before Christmas, and the interval was occupied by Marian in making the most elaborate preparations for her visit.

Maynard informed me that Nora and Fanny also had been invited, but that they did not intend going till after the Christmas week. I felt glad to hear they would be there so soon after Marian, though I should have been puzzled to explain why I was glad.

During this time no allusion was made by either of us to any subject which had been the cause of discussion between us.

There was a melancholy stillness as in a house hushed by the presence of a corpse.

Nina flew about from room to room with most fabulous accounts of the glories of newly-arrived dresses: but to have judged from her mother's own manner, she was fulfilling an unpleasant but unavoidable duty.

I heard her tell Maynard that she was not at all in the mood to pay a gay visit; but that the autumn had been so unhealthy, she was glad to remove Nina from Speynings, and not to bring Harry to it.

"One's children must be the first consideration always." I overheard her say this. It was a phrase I had heard before, and I smiled bitterly at the remembrance. They went. I put her into the carriage, carefully arranged her dress and cloaks, and went round to the other side to see that all was as it should be.

"Good-bye, Hubert."

Her eyes rested on mine for a moment. Her glance was steady and searching, and with something of triumph in it—something of farewell was mingled with it also. Certainly, if there had been contest between us, she looked the victor as she leant back, luxuriously folded up in her warm cloaks and furs, with her beautiful face slightly

flushed, from some emotion I could not define, and her brilliant smile as she looked back at me where I stood—a pale, grave man, with the marks of disappointment and wasting sorrow on both face and figure.

I confess it was with a sense of defeat that I went into the house again. I had given her the power of marring my life, and what was I in hers? I could prevent her receiving the homage of a fool, but was she the more mine for that prevention? Warburton's good nature had saved him from actively opposing her, and he had received his reward in her apparent deference and docility to him. She was quite ready to deceive any one willing to be deceived, for I knew her nature was antagonistic to all rough and rude methods; but with me it was impossible to act so, and if in her heart she despised me the less, I am confident that no one had ever excited so much of genuine dislike in her as I had during these last months. I had found her out, I had resisted her, and I was not to be subdued. Such were the thoughts with which I sat in my home. But to say the truth, there was a sense of relief also. The tension caused by a desire of keeping up appearances was

over. I could look as I felt—a thoroughly miserable and hopeless man.

I avoided the Rectory till the two ladies had departed; they were to precede Maynard by a few days, but after they left, he and I were much together. He was singularly kind to me. On one subject (Marian) my lips were sealed, but on all others we talked openly. He probed me deeply, and ascertained, I think, that my nature was perverted, but not utterly bad. Education, over-indulgence, had done great harm, an evil love had done more; but cut down now to the very roots, as all was, a growth of better things might be expected.

CHAPTER X.

I HAD had a few lines from Marian, announcing her safe arrival. Very cold and very brief was the note; I had answered it, and that was all.

One evening as I sat with Maynard, he received a letter from Nora. Devoted husband as he was, he made an apology, and opened it immediately.

His countenance changed a little as he read it, and I saw him suddenly put it down and look at me.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing—have you heard from Mrs. Spencer?"

"Not the last few days—I may have a letter this evening."

"Are you going to the Talbots?"

"Not till I fetch Marian away—they are not friends of mine, you know."

"Nora is very anxious that I should go there

to-morrow: there is to be a very crowded ball. Why don't you come with me?"

His voice was eager.

"Why should I go? Tell me, Maynard; what is it? There is something I should know."

"I never could manage anything in my life," said Maynard, bluntly: "you had better read this."

He separated the first sheet—containing, I suppose, some wife-like greetings—from the others, and put the rest into my hands, while he went to give orders for his departure on the morrow.

These were the words of the letter:

"I told you how surprised I was that the Talbots should have remembered us after so many years; but I discovered accidentally that Marian had written to them some weeks ago, and had so deplored the unhealthiness of the air of Speynings, and her dislike to bringing Harry into it from Harrow, that Mrs. Talbot considered herself bound to invite Harry, and then arranged to have the whole party. Mrs. Talbot considers Harry Villiers something in the light of an heir. She told me all this as we were walking one day. How like Marian! I suppose she felt moped at Speynings.

No one, it is true, can have altered so much in health and spirits as Mr. Spencer these last few months. Marian never looked better, but complains of her chest, and talks of going to Italy for her health in the spring. So does Lord Lascelles, who has been staying here a long time. The Talbots are distant relations of his. He looks at Marian as if she were something divine, but she does not distinguish him in any way. Fanny says Mr. Spencer ought to be here (the 'ought' was dashed). Marian is very kind to me, but I never can get on with her somehow. She treats Fanny in a most strange way, as if she were very sorry for her, or as if she felt she had injured her. I do not understand it, nor does Fan, but it makes her savage. I am glad for her sake that when we return she must fulfil her old promise of spending six months with her uncle in Scotland. Marian seems trying to fasten some imputation on her. Nobody could ever explain Marian's whims, and this is one I suppose; but I confess I wish Mr. Spencer were here, for there are many disagreeable things said of him, as if he neglected her, and was behaving very ill."

I smiled when I put down this letter. I *under-*

stood Marian—not entirely as I found afterwards, but better than poor simple Nora. It was requisite that I should go for my own honour, not as regarded Lascelles, but as to my own character as a husband. I could also save Fanny from the imputation which I saw would be dexterously fastened on her of being Marian's rival.

"Do not mention me, Maynard," I said, "in your answer, but I will accompany you. How soon can we get there?"

"We shall catch the 5 p.m. train, and get there in time for the ball. I will telegraph that I am coming. But I cannot get away before that."

"That will do."

When I went home I found that no letters had arrived from Marian for me. I was very busy—I will not answer for presentiments—but I got through a quantity of letters, accounts, arrangements, as if I had had a notion that it would be long before I did the same again. It was three in the morning before I had finished.

Since Marian had left I slept in a little room next to the library; but this evening, from some cause I could not have explained, I had given orders I would sleep up-stairs. As I went up the

broad flight which led to the rooms peculiarly appropriated to Marian, I stopped to look out at one of the windows. The whole earth was white with snow. It was falling with amazing thickness and rapidity. There are few things more ghastly of the kind than the noiseless fall of a heavy snow-storm, and I shivered as I dropped the curtain.

In passing through Marian's dressing-room and boudoir, I noticed, without being scarcely aware of it, how deserted and dismantled they seemed.

The bed-room also had a bare look, and I distinguished that some little miniatures and ornaments had been taken down.

I was strangely excited as I tried to sleep. "Some persons are particularly affected by the atmospheric influence of a night like this," I thought. My pulses throbbed, my temples beat, my lips were parched,—something of the wonderful effect produced by Indian hemp seemed to me to be produced by the snow-charged air; feverish visions assailed me—not dreams, for I was awake, and yet my will had as little control as in sleep;—pitiable recollections, undescribable yearnings, voluptuous memories, a rush of bitter recollections, and then a sudden blank horror.

When I rose there were drops of damp on my brow, as after an illness.

When I went down stairs the snow had ceased falling, and the sky was clear and bright as crystal. A hard frost, such as had not been remembered in the country for years, had frozen earth and water into one glittering white surface.

When I informed my old housekeeper that I was going to Talbot House for a few days, she requested me to make certain arrangements for some of the cottagers. Such an intensity of cold was what they were totally unprepared to meet. I am glad I did so.

In the morning I had a few lines from Maynard to say that he would try to start by an earlier train, for the roads between the station and Talbot House would be as slippery as glass, and we should be hours, and not minutes, doing the five miles. At last I had made all my arrangements, sent my luggage, and prepared to walk to meet the train. Just as I was going the postman brought the letters. He had been, of course, detained by the iron-bound roads. I slipped mine into my pocket. There were none, I knew, that would demand immediate attention.

When I reached the railroad Maynard's servant overtook me; he could not leave by that train. I was to tell Nora not to be anxious; if he were delayed he would telegraph, but he was in great hopes of arriving that night.

I was so busy wondering what excuse or explanation I should give of my sudden arrival, that the time passed quickly.

When I reached the end of my journey there was a great difficulty to find a conveyance. By the offer of preposterous payment, I found a man willing to convey my luggage on a handbarrow, and there was nothing left for me but to walk.

I did so. I never shall forget the glory of that evening. The stars were as large and brilliant as in southern latitudes. The air was bright with the cold. "Like fireflies tangled in a silver braid," the branches of the trees looked glowing and luminous amid the frosty brilliants with which they were sheathed.

But in the utter absence of road our progress was slow. It was nearly eleven when we reached the Hall. Coming on foot in this manner my arrival was entirely unnoticed. The quadrangle was one blaze of light. The ball had commenced

I would not disturb any one, but asked to be taken to the room which I knew was prepared for Maynard. When there I determined to wait his arrival, and drawing my chair by the fire took out my letters to read, by way of beguiling the time. After perusing two or three of little importance, I took up one which was addressed in a strange hand.

It was a communication from a lawyer. Its purport was a demand of legal separation, separate maintenance, &c., &c., on the part of my wife.

A few lines from Marian herself were inclosed. They ran thus :—

"I choose this method of communication that you may know my resolve is not to be shaken.

"I have acquired a knowledge of you these last few months which would render our living under the same roof impossible.

"My English or my Venetian rival may console you.

"My fixed determination is to go to Italy. I require a warmer climate for my health. It will be beneficial also to Nina. Harry will join us after he has left school.

"I do not reproach or blame you. Be just to me. All my friends know that my health requires this change. It will be your own fault if, by any idle opposition, you draw down on us a scandalous publicity. I only ask you to forget me and leave me free. "MARIAN."

I read this letter twice over. This, then, was her plan. Liberty, self-indulgence, luxury—without a hated husband. For me, I was to be left with my household gods shivered around me, there, where I had desecrated the altars for her.

I now know, or think I have reason to know, it was only a threat. She felt sure that, to avoid running the gauntlet of country gossip, I would be willing to conciliate her. She trusted that there was still sufficient softness in my heart towards her to make me dread a life-long parting. It was a bold stroke; but she had well calculated its chances. If successful in making me anxious to avoid a separation, she could make her own terms; and if it came to the worst, and I was obdurate, she gained freedom, and the sympathy which a beautiful woman driven from her home

by the infidelity of her husband is sure to excite in all right-thinking persons.

I was calm; but for a moment everything swayed around me, and there was a surging sound in my ears, as if I was at sea. I then rose, and taking a pencil, wrote a few lines on the back of the note.

"I have read your letter since I arrived here. It is by a chance that it is so, but that chance may be life or death to both. Meet me in the conservatory directly, and after we have spoken face to face for five minutes, if you persist in your wish, we will part for ever."

I called a servant, and told him to find Mrs. Spencer, and give her that note as soon as he could.

I did not wish to be found here by Maynard; I therefore left the room, and found my way along a passage which I hoped might lead me by some back stairs to the conservatory. At the upper end was a door; I opened it. It led into a gallery, which ran round a saloon, or smaller hall, raised by a few stairs from the large entrance-hall. The

dancing was there. I looked down for a moment. It was a whirl of festal dresses, lights, and garlands. The musicians were in a temporary erection almost opposite to me, but somewhat lower.

As I stood, it seemed to me that the whole gallery rocked to and fro, and that the draperies and flags which had been arranged above and beneath to mask the beams of the stand for the orchestra, shone as if fire had been behind them. There was a hot vapour which rose that was almost stifling, and a red glow through the air which even the blaze of lights could not account for or explain.

As I leaned down my eyes were caught and riveted by one figure, which made me forget everything else. Marian was standing a little behind the dancers, listening to Lascelles, who was talking earnestly to her.

There is an air of Weber's which I never hear without its reminding me, in some strange and incongruous manner, of Marian as I now saw her. In all the great composer's music there is beneath the melody and beauty an undertone of something magical and wild, which almost produces a disso-

nance; a dissonance not in the harmony itself, but in the effect produced. Marian's aspect as she thus stood, with diamonds glittering on her hair, breast, and arms, her dress, of some silver tissue, floating like a pale flame around her, and the inexplicable expression of her face—half triumph, half melancholy—had the same mysterious and fatal sweetness.

I turned away, and tried to shut out the vision from brain and heart. I crossed the hall, and at last entered a conservatory gorgeous with tropical bloom, and radiant with coloured lamps, but as I had expected when I asked Marian to join me there, entirely deserted and untenanted. I stood there for awhile, concealed by a huge stand of broad-leaved plants. I sought a moment for reflection, but my senses seemed spell-bound. Neither grief nor rage, but a sullen and stupid indifference was gaining possession of me. There was also a coward and abject feeling, which galled me, even at the moment I could not deny to myself that I felt it. Did I yet cling to Marian's presence? Did the idea that I should see her never more, never more as in the old time beside me, sting deeper than all the foregone alienation

and severance? Did I yet prize the goblet though the wine was all spilt?

As I thus stood two ladies passed me.

"How late your husband is," said one.

"Yes; but he will come, I know, if he can. You must remember the roads are in a dreadful state."

"Yes, one sheet of ice is round the house; there is not a drop of water for miles; every pond, every stream is frozen. I pity anyone travelling such a night, Nora."

"I hope Mr. Spencer will come with him."

Her companion sighed deeply, but did not reply.

"Shall we go back, Fanny?"

"Wait a minute—the ball-room is suffocating."

"Yes; I do not think it a good plan to have blocked up the doors at one end."

"They could not put the stand for the band anywhere else; and it looks very well as you enter, all blazing with light as it is—the music seems to come out of the light."

"Yes, but there is something peculiarly stifling in the air."

"Let us go into your room for a few minutes,

Nora. I feel so nervous and foolish to-night, as if something were going to happen. I wish your husband would come."

"Come along, then—we will be quiet for a few minutes."

They passed on.

CHAPTER XI.

How long I remained in the semi-stupor into which I had fallen I cannot say. Through the chaos into which my thoughts and feeling were rapidly merging, I could hear the music of the ball swelling and falling in the distance. There was something hideous to me in the sounds. A measureless disgust at life, at its hollow cheats, its sickening illusions, was sweeping over me wave upon wave, and to hear from out of these depths into which I was sinking, these sounds of festival, seemed a refinement of torture. Those joyous cadences ringing through the air with a fall of light playful notes, or rising with sudden breaks, into a gush of more spirited and resolute measures, mocked the wretch whose life would soon be musicless evermore. Would Marian come? But why was I so unmanned? Nay, it was no use

deceiving myself. What other end could there be to our union? But we all invariably shut our eyes to the inevitable law of consequences, and hope for exceptional miracles to save us from the effects of our own actions. I knew Marian. Alas! of what avail was the knowledge? Could it shield me now? A few years ago, after having borne one hundredth part of the pain I had lately gone through, I should have welcomed escape, freedom, absence; but I was a soberer, sadder person now. True, her falsehood, her heartlessness, her deceit, had worn my life as a sword wears out a scabbard, but the scabbard has been shaped to the sword—withdraw the weapon, and the sheath remains empty, defaced, useless.

I started as if I had been stung as I thought thus, and leaned my head against one of the columns of the conservatory.

How it seemed to vibrate with the voluptuous thrill of the music and the dance so near me! I listened with a straining eagerness, and wondered how long it would last. Hours and hours seemed to have elapsed while I thus stood listening here the night and I, sole audience of all these festal melodies, when suddenly there was a sharp pause

as if all the instruments had shot off into a shock of silence, and all the steps had been transfixed into sudden motionlessness, and then from the topmost height of stillness, the night and I, were plunged into the wildest chaos of shrieks, screams, and tumult. Cry upon cry resounded through the whole house and pealed through conservatory and through hall and through basement; and in a moment every place was filled with persons rushing, scrambling, flying from some pursuing horror. Women fainting, sobbing, shrieking, men supporting them, crowding round them, blocking up the passages, filling up the doors, all blindly seeking flight, and each in his frantic effort to force his way becoming an obstacle to himself and others. It was a fearful scene of desperate fear and maddened selfishness; but I had caught, higher than the loudest shriek, the word "Fire!" and my name called in a frenzy of appeal by Marian.

I had paused a second, and then, darting through a side passage, had crossed the whole length of the house, and battled my way through the descending fugitives up the few steps which led to the ball-room.

O God! shall I ever forget what I saw? The

room was almost deserted, yet a roaring sound filled it, and through volumes of black smoke pouring out towards where I stood, I could discern that, at the opposite end, there was a wall of flame mounting higher and higher, till the long lurid forked tongues, licked the roof over the gallery in which had sat the musicians. The whole of the draperies and beams had fallen into ashes, and in front of all, with her light robes blown out behind her, in one red halo of fire, her face convulsed with fear, her mouth black and distorted, wildly swaying to and fro as if groping for shelter was Marian—alone! She did not see me, for her eyes were closed, but she heard a step, and with one cry and bound forwards, tossing up her arms, round which the fire, like the coiled rings of a serpent, was burning closer and closer, she rushed into my arms.

"Save me! save me!" she said.

I held her, I pressed her, I clapsed her, till my own hair and face and breast were scorched and burning in the same flames, and tried by the very closeness of the embrace to overcome the dread power which held her. I struggled with it as with a beast of prey. I drew her nearer and

nearer to a door from which hung a woollen curtain, which I would have folded round her, but, after the first moment of passive endurance, she struggled so violently that it was almost impossible to hold her, and my own senses were failing me from the smoke, the flame, and that loud deafening voice of the fire. The last thing I remember was some heavy cloak being thrown (by some person who perilled life in entering the blazing ring of fire which encircled us) round us, or rather over us, for I had at last tottered and fallen, still clutching Marian, but with a horrible sense that what I held, or dress or flesh, was pulverising in my grasp. I remember nothing more!

It must have been four or five days afterwards when I regained clear consciousness. I was in a burning fever, and this gave me a sudden and delirious and fictitious strength. I was in bed. It must have been late at night, or rather early in the morning, for there was that indescribable chill in the air which is the harbinger of dawn, and which penetrates with a mysterious and piercing power even in a closed room.

I saw that there was a mattress in the furthest

part of the room on the floor, and that my servant was asleep on it.

I tried to raise my hands, but they were stiff from pain, and swathed in some soft wool which made them powerless.

I did not at once remember where I was. I fancied it was the continuation of my long illness after my return from the Continent years ago. I expected to see my mother enter. I thought of the Grange, of the Warburtons.

The door opened and a man entered. He did not come up to the bed, and I could not see his face. He roused the servant, and they talked together.

I waited.

Then I heard from below the tramp of horses, as of carriages being drawn before the house very slowly. "For fear of disturbing me," I thought, and closed my eyes.

When I opened them Maynard stood beside the bed.

There was a night-light near the bed, and I saw he was dressed as for a journey. He looked very pale.

"You are better, Spencer," he said, for he saw

there was recognition in my eyes. I remembered now.

"Better, yes. Where is Marian?"

His voice was very low and sad as he answered.

"You did all that you could—she did not suffer after——. It was a frightful accident—many have been sadly hurt—no one can account for it, except that in lighting up the room some spark must have fallen on the artificial wood-work which supported the musicians' gallery. It must have been going on for hours before it was discovered, and then it had spread far and wide, the difficulty of obtaining water, the panic, the draughts produced by the sudden rush outwards and the opening of every door and window, by which escape could be sought, increased the danger."

"And Marian?"

"No one can explain it clearly; but it seems she had only that minute left the dancing. A servant, so says Lascelles, had given her a note, and she crossed over from the dancers and took it to read and to answer, under the musicians' gallery, where the greatest light was: some portion of the crumbling drapery must have fallen on her dress, for she was in flames in a moment;—too

frightened to move at first, and then too far from the door to reach it. She never spoke again, but was insensible to the last. The physicians say the fright must have produced a congestion of the brain; she did not suffer; had it not been for this congestion you would have saved her."

How kindly Maynard tried to convey comfort.

"It was a dreadful fatality her receiving that note," he continued.

I groaned.

"I arrived in the very midst of the confusion. I have done all that I thought you would wish. I am going now."

"Going?"

"To Speynings. Nora will do her best for you, though her hands are quite full. Poor Fanny injured herself very much in trying to save you both. It was too late for Marian, but I think but for her you must have perished, too."

I turned away my head; I could not control the poor womanish tears; from what untold depths of bitterness did they not flow!

Maynard left the room, and he beckoned to the servant to follow him to receive some more orders.

I waited. I felt that the fever was mounting to my brain, but I was cunning and guarded, as madness always is.

I rose, upheld by a strange strength, and got out of bed, and supporting myself as best I might, tottered to the window. I opened the curtains—the shutters were closed but not fastened—with great difficulty, owing to my bandaged hands; I opened them and looked out. Had I not been in this strange, half-somnambulic state I could not have done it.

I looked out, it was not quite dark; the early dawn of a winter morning was grey in the sky. As far as could be seen one carpet of spotless white covered the earth, but beside the house some dark vehicles were drawn, and there the pawing and stamping of the horses had blackened and broken up the snow. There were torches flaring about, held by men in funereal garments.

I was so stupefied that I did not immediately understand what it was; when suddenly, as the ghastly procession ranged itself in order, I saw that it was a funeral. There was the hearse, and then, as if rung on my brain with agonising distinctness, I heard the bells of the neigh-

bouring church toll—toll slowly, and then the whole array defiled before the house, and it took the direction, not of the church, but of the neighbouring station.

It then all flashed upon me: Maynard was going to Speynings; that hearse which I saw was bound there, too; that bell which was clanging in my brain with such fearful and tragic pathos told me with its iron tongue what it was I looked upon. This was the last that I should ever see—the last I should ever hear of—Marian. I felt as if that sound had cloven me to the earth.

CHAPTER XII.

A LONG period ensued of darkness and delirium. I remember by snatches certain changes, but the mass of days which passed were lost to me. I have only one distinct recollection of that time. Over and over again that spectral-looking funeral procession over the sullied snow, the flare of the torches, and the tolling of the bell were repeated, till I wonder life did not perish in the suffering. I witnessed it as one might witness a scene in a play, but I could not escape from it. As soon as the end came it was repeated all over again, till I became insensible; but with the miserable return of consciousness returned this nightmare of pain and horror with more and more verisimilitude, and it was rendered yet more vivid by the utter oblivion in which I remained of everything else.

I had a faint notion that I had been moved, that I had been borne through the air: but it was at intervals only, and this notion was unconnected with any feeling of leaving one place or arriving at another, and was only bewildering and unintelligible.

At last, after a longer period of utter darkness than any that had preceded it, I clearly felt that life, sentient life, was no longer swaying backwards and forwards on a trembling balance, but was settling and righting itself. I was utterly powerless to move hand and foot, but I opened my eyes, and by the uncertain light of a flickering fire I could distinguish that I was in the small room next to the library at Speynings. For the first time for months no phantoms clouded my vision, and my hearing, which seemed endowed with double its usual acuteness, was no longer oppressed with any unreal sound.

I heard the irregular drop of the coal-ashes from the fire, and the crackling of the wood, and the faint breathing of some one—a woman—seated beside the curtain at the foot of the bed. There was another person also in the room seated on some low seat before the fire, for I could see

the shadow of her figure on the ground as the light from the fire rose and fell.

The silence was unbroken. I could make no sign or sound, and the two persons who watched might have been statues from their motionlessness. The room was quite dark, but whether it was morning or evening I knew not. At last I heard the door open, and a footstep, so gentle that no ear save one so preternaturally acute as mine could have detected it, slowly and cautiously advanced into the room.

The lady approached the person in the chair, who rose as she touched her lightly on the shoulder. I recognised her then: she was the woman who had been my mother's maid, whose husband's vote I had tried to secure at the time of the election. She had nursed my mother in her last illness, and they had sent for her for me.

"Has he moved, nurse?"

"No, ma'am."

"It is six o'clock; you had better go and take your two hours' rest. There is some tea in your room. The doctor will be here at eight."

"Yes, ma'am."

The woman who answered went away, and the

lady having bent over me, and listened attentively, took her place.

I recognised, by the height and the figure, Nora Maynard.

As she turned round to the fire she was first aware that there was some one before it. She started, but, controlling herself, in a very hushed whisper asked:

"Is it you, Fanny?"

"Yes."

"My poor Fanny! what are you doing there? Have you not been in bed all night?"

"No."

"How wrong! and you are only just out of bed yourself—you will be ill again."

There was no answer, and again a dead silence. Presently Fanny rose and approached the bed. She knelt beside it, and stooped low over it; but from the position in which my head was placed she could not see my face.

"How long, Nora, did the doctor say the stupor would last?"

Nora hesitated.

"If he did not regain his consciousness he would die, he said, did he not?"

"Let us hope——" said Nora, very faintly.

Fanny turned, and kneeling on the ground, as she was, put her head down on Nora's knee, and I could see that her whole frame trembled with the violence of her emotion.

"You must not, Fanny, must not," said poor Nora, bending over her.

"I must."

"Oh, Fanny, I do not understand you: it is very sad, very dreadful, poor man, but——"

"Nora," said Fanny, raising her small head with that singular dignity of bearing which was so peculiarly her own, "I have loved him all my life: hush, he will never know it, he is dying."

"Loved him!"

"Yes: when I was a child I was taught, persuaded, encouraged to love him by his mother. When I was a girl it was the same, she hoped and led me to hope he loved me; he was so good, so loveable then; we were so happy; those impressions, Nora, are ineffaceable; then came your sister, and all was changed. I kept away—saw little of him—but it was too late to undo what had grown with my growth, and mixed indelibly with every feeling of my heart. I could subdue

the expression of it, and he never even guessed it; but his mother understood me, and when she died in my arms she prayed me by that love, although I had then overcome it, to forgive his wrongs to her, and to be his friend still."

"I always thought you hated him."

"One day, inspired by some regret for the past, he began speaking to me with something of the old affection; but as I knew that he was unchanged towards Marian, though she was then not free, my anger and scorn knew no bounds."

"And then?"

"We became entirely estranged, and I thought my heart was completely hardened against him: but when I saw, some time after his marriage, how he needed friends, when I could trace some of the old kindness of heart in many of his acts at Speynings, my heart shook off that foolish resentment, and I remembered my promise to his mother, and I resolved to be again his friend"

"My poor Fanny!"

"You may well pity me;" and the tears choked her voice as she drooped her head lower and lower to Nora's very feet. "It was very hard to see him suffer, to read it in his altered

face, and to know it was irrevocable. Nora, had it been possible I could have knelt at Marian's feet to beseech her to love him, but that she never did. Her strange conduct to me at Talbot House, half pity and half scorn, finally opened my eyes: she had read my secret, though no one else had, and I determined to leave Speynings for ever."

"But, Fanny, you knew all his faults?"

"Yes."

"I have heard you say he was often very selfish?"

"Yes."

"Weak—fickle?"

"Yes."

Nora kissed the hands which lay clasped on her lap as Fanny still knelt at her feet.

"Nora," said Fanny, in almost a solemn voice, "is it not the essential attribute of love that it has insight? I saw evil, but I knew there was good which could overcome it: it had been there once. God knows I did no wrong to Marian even in my most secret thought, or in my inmost heart, or I could not speak so now; you know I tried to save her life at the peril of my own for his

sake. I did not know Hubert was there when I rushed to her in spite of all."

"You did—you did, though Maynard held you back."

"Think if there could be wrong to her in my love when I can thus speak of it to her sister, and when he is dying." And again tears choked her voice.

And this love had been beside me all my life, and I was as ignorant of it as a blind man is of a star. Oh, fool! oh, idiot—and I dared to call that feeling love, which custom, satiety, faults in another had so changed from love to indifference. Well may the great poetess say:

> "Those *never* loved
> Who dream they loved *once*."

Here was love, and mine for Marian had been but a base and specious counterfeit.

Had I already passed the portals of the grave and listened to the speech of angels! If so, it could not have been with a more complete sense of renunciation and divorce from self.

It seemed to me that I was shown, as by an inexorable judge, the great gift which had been bestowed on me, and of which I had taken no

account. What might have been!—what never could be!—I was dying. It was well to die, having foregone such happiness and inflicted and endured such misery.

Suddenly, Fanny, who had been quite still and passive for a few minutes, raised her head.

"Don't cry about me, Nora; I feel your warm tears over my hand. But, darling,—my own dear Nora, you will understand why I came here for the last night."

"*Must* you leave us to-day?"

"Yes, my aunt wants me more than you do, and, besides, I can take that poor little Nina out of your way."

"What shall I do without you for so many months?"

"It was settled so long ago. I cannot alter it now,—I have no right to do so; but, Nora, you will let me know *whatever* happens, directly,—do not delay."

Again there was a pause, and then they heard, as well as I did, the distant sound of a carriage.

Fanny rose to her feet.

"I must be gone before Dr. Conway comes in."

She stooped over the bed, and those soft, pure

lips breathed a prayer over me which was like a blessing. She paused one minute, and her tears fell warm on my forehead; and then she left the room. The doctor came in.

Reader, I did not die.

There is a strange reparative power in all of us, born of the soul, but which influences the body. That spring of vitality had been touched in me. I recovered to the surprise of all: I was for months a sufferer—it is possible that all my life I shall be an invalid, but I have regained sufficient health to be able to work at the work which was given me to do in this world. I think that ere long I proved to the loving soul, which had so gently scanned my soul, that the true inscription was there, though so much dross and corruption had covered it.

Many long months passed before Fanny and I met again. The innocent gladness with which she congratulated me on my recovery pierced me to the heart. If amid what Patmore calls "the glooms of hell," some wretch should look up to a smiling angel above him, would he not have a deeper sense of his own loss and ruin? The confession I had overheard had separated me

from her, as from something enshrined and sainted. My reverence for that pure, loving nature removed it from me.

Death had won for me that holy chrism (the utterance of her love), but life discrowned me. I felt that a heart all scarred over with one fatal passion, was not a heart that could be offered to her. I was like one who has knelt to Baal, and poured out all his wine and oil on unholy altars, when the true deity manifests itself. Where, amid those ruins and that waste, can a fitting temple be erected?

But I was wrong in this as in all, and slowly I learned it.

If the voice of love calls to us—though we are buried in sin and misery, sepulchred in corruption, with the defeature of death on our brows and the grave-clothes on our limbs—we must come forth and obey it.

One evening, about eighteen months after Fanny's return to the Maynards, I called at a lodge in which lived that old servant of my mother's, who had nursed me in my last severe illness. She was a widow now, and had removed here near her old home. She was dying, poor

woman, of consumption. When I entered the parlour, the little servant who waited on her told me Miss Fanny was with her, and asked me to wait. I consented. The parlour opened out of the bed-room, and I could hear Fanny's gentle voice reading to her. I heard the words distinctly, and they lost none of their soothing and healing power on me when uttered by that voice. When Fanny had finished, she asked the poor creature if she could do anything for her, or bring anything the next day.

"No, ma'am. I have everything I can want: the squire lets me want for nothing. He is very good—his mother's own son, after all."

I did not hear Fanny's reply.

"I do wish he looked happier like."

"He has suffered a good deal."

"Yes, ma'am; but there's no reason he shouldn't get over it. He did his duty to her, if any man did."

Fanny was again inaudible.

"But you would make him happier, Miss. Please, don't be angry with me—it's flying in the face of Providence not to see it; and how glad Madam Spencer would have been."

"Hush!" I heard Fanny say; "you must not speak so, Susan. It would vex me, but that I'm going away."

"Lor, Miss, don't you say so. When?"

"Not yet, Susan; but you know I go always at this time for my six months' visit to Scotland."

I would not overhear more, but gently slipped out, and resolved to return the next day.

I turned into the avenue, and paced it up and down.

At last Fanny came out, and I met her at the gate, as she turned in the direction of the rectory.

"Poor Susan is sinking fast," she said to me.

"Yes, it must soon be over. She is a faithful, good creature."

"Yes, she is such a link with the past, that to me it will be really a great loss. There is so little left now of the old time at Speynings——"

These words seemed to drop from her unconsciously.

"Worse than nothing," I replied; "for that which is left there is so unworthy of that time——"

She interrupted me quickly.

"Do not speak so. I was foolish."

"Just. Only just."

"No, not just. You have done all you could. If the dead could speak with my lips, they would say you had done well, Hubert."

And for the first time, in her emotion, for long years, she called me by that name.

"Fanny," I said, "have you forgiven me, then, —have you felt that if repentance, devotion, reverence, could merit forgiveness, I was not unworthy——?"

"*I* have nothing to forgive; no one has been more sorry for you in your grief; no one has so truly wished to see you happy once more."

"Happiness is a word that has no meaning in it for me; for years I sought it, regardless of everything but my own selfish interpretation of it, and it has left a bitter and deadly taste in me. I need pardon, compassion, love;—will you forgive, will you pity, will you love?"

She started, and turned pale.

"Speak, Fanny; I can bear rejection; I have nerved myself to do so, for I know my unworthiness; but I wish you to know, come what may, that my whole heart is yours. Will y[illegible]

Her hand fell in mine as she murmured—

"Yes."

"Will you take my life to unite to yours—yours so good, pure, true; mine so full of soils and stains?"

"Yes."

"Let me kneel to thank God—to thank you for this goodness, and to swear to you you shall not repent it."

"It is not goodness, Hubert, for I have always loved you."

How can I convey in words the expression of her face, the tone of her voice, when she said this? But I was lifted by them into a region high above all past sorrows and errors:

> "Love like death unlocks the portal
> Through which souls redeemèd go;
> And the mortal to immortal
> Passes with transfigured brow."

And I can say, in concluding this chronicle of my early life, that the glow of heart which was excited by Fanny's words, never faded. If in my life I have avoided evil or inclined to good, those words were my shield and my talisman. I had loved with the lower part of my nature, and that

love had swathed, bound, and covered me from truth and heaven. I was now loved, and I loved with a sacred and purifying love, and my soul was revealed and made free. The sacred and profane love of Titian was to me a fact, and not an allegory.

A TUSCAN WEDDING.

CHAPTER I.

THE "festa" of the Ascension is celebrated very merrily in Florence. The whole population spend it in the open air. They breakfast under the trees of the Cascine, or go to the Parterre. The Parterre is a small enclosure, with shrubs and flowers and seats, outside the Porta San Gallo. Nurses and children chiefly affect this last spot. From the earliest hours of the morning, children of all classes, carrying little baskets containing bread-and-butter, a few strawberries, or some raw shelled peas, and their nurses bearing bottles of water, are to be seen streaming through this, the northern gate of Florence. The elder part of the community go to the Cascine. In the afternoon the long alleys are filled with carriages, but the

meadows and enclosures are peopled with the festive companies of the morning. Tables, with coarse white cloths, are spread under the trees, and crowds of gay people in their best dresses are laughing over their coffee, or sipping out of cloudy greenish glasses that insipid beverage, alkermes.

But, amidst all this idleness, there are still some busy bees mingled with the drones, earnestly occupied in gathering their golden honey. Threading the carriages are the flower-girls and (melancholy misnomer!) flower-men. The flower-girl, let me whisper in an aside, is the only institution which, in these days of universal improvement and increasing prosperity, has unmistakably deteriorated. She is no longer pretty and picturesque. She is old, blowsy, ugly, but alas! not a fraction more respectable than formerly. Besides the flower-girls are mischievous urchins, crawling under the carriages, clambering up the wheels, mounting the steps, and offering in every direction to the unsuspecting "forestiéri" little cages about three inches square, each containing a "grillo cantante." Feeble shrieks are heard as the sudden cri-cri of the imprisoned cricket reveals its presence, and a

good deal of laughter from the braver and more experienced is the result. It is all very pretty and pleasant. These breaks in the workday-life of a people may be sneered at by utilitarians, but are undeniably a good. "Man does not live by bread alone" is a truth which cannot be too much insisted on in these days; and a holiday, a breathing space in an existence of incessant toil, compensates for the hiatus which it causes in the sum of the weekly earnings, by an ample addition to the account of health and happiness.

Standing under one of the trees on the evening of Ascension Day, 1858, were two women. It would have been difficult at first sight to detect precisely to what class they belonged. Their petticoats were swelling, their mantles fashionable, their bonnets stylish; it was only on a close inspection that one saw how ordinary and cheap were the materials which produced such an effect. Florentines of the feminine gender are passionately fond of the pomps and vanities of dress. Looked at æsthetically, their getting up for a "festa" is the result of the combined efforts of the best parts of our moral and intellectual nature. Self-denial, patience, industry, invention, fertility

of resource, and the absolute sacrifice of such lusts of the flesh as eating and drinking, are all brought into operation to produce, at a fabulously cheap price, the elegance which meets our eyes in every public walk and café, or looks down upon us from every window.

On a nearer view, the seven rows of uneven pearls beneath the elder woman's plump brown chin, and her long gold ear-rings, showed she was of the peasant class, and the girl's hands in her netted black mittens, though adorned with the due proportion of rings, wore the thick mottled aspect which identifies a washerwoman in all countries.

"Do you go there to-morrow?" said the elder woman.

"Yes, it is my week; the 'bucato' (washing) returned on Monday: it is mended and folded, and then on Saturday we iron it. It needs little mending; for Signor Michelini has such quantities, and it is of such a good quality, that it never wears out."

"Yes, he is very rich, poveruccio."

This contradictory termination of the phrase was a term of endearment, for the Signor Michelini was her foster son.

"Have you any message, mother? It does not signify though, for to-morrow he comes to Florence himself."

"No, Cecchina mia, he must have patience; I see nothing to hope——"

"But nothing to fear?" asked the young woman.

"Così, no one has come forward yet, but——"

"I must say it *is* hard. If I were the Signorina, I would go into a convent at once."

"But a dowry is wanted for that also. We poor women, Cecca, are not fit for God's service or a man's home, unless we have a few francesconi. Be thankful that your old mother screwed and screwed for you. What sacrifices I made, God only knows; but thanks to the Madonna and those forestiéri children I nursed, you have a good portion. But it is getting late, the dew is falling; call Beppo—we must go home."

Beppo was leaning against a tree, smoking, when this colloquy took place. He now came up, and all three advanced in the direction of Florence

"Take care of Cecca to-morrow, Beppo, and fetch her on Saturday evening from the train. She is going to Pistoia."

Beppo nodded, as if he thought words of assent to such a request superfluous; or it might be that Siora Rosa talked so much, she left him scant space for any other answer. Beppo was a lethargic, handsome, tobacco-ruminating animal, and as soon as some slow idea was working its way laboriously into speech in honour of Cecca, her mother whipped her off to listen to some long, rattling torrents of words, which took away his breath even to listen to, and quite forbade any attempt at a reply.

"There they are," said Rosa.

An old-fashioned, lumbering barouche was passing. The carriage and harness were evidently of mediæval date, the horses were aged, and had seen much service, and the coachman wore an ancient livery, which was so tight that his arms seemed pinioned in it, while a dangerous-looking red on his cheeks and forehead showed how strong was the compression of throat and chest. Such an equipage would have been ridiculous anywhere else, but here it passed muster, for the sake of the coat of arms on the panels. In Tuscany, wealth is profoundly respected, but noble birth and a long-descended title, more so. The occu-

pants of that carriage could boast that some of the noblest blood in Tuscany flowed in their veins. They called themselves Bentivoglio.

The two ladies who sat facing the horses were handsome, dark, and proud-looking: one in the full bloom of maturity, the other verging on old age.

"How pale the Signorina looks," remarked Francesca.

"Every one looks pale near the Signora Elena," said the mother, thus delicately hinting at the rouge which was laid with no sparing hand on the old lady's cheeks.

Opposite the dark-eyed ladies (who were evidently mother and daughter) sat another one, who bore no resemblance whatever to them. She was pale, small, and fragile-looking; her features were regular, though with the same defect as the "Poesia of Carlo Dolce," the nose was too long. This is a fault, by the way, often found in Italian faces. The soft brown hair was thin, and arranged so as to give no relief to the complexion: the whole person seemed shrunk and blanched as a plant which has not had air and sun enough. Seen alone, her age would have been doubtful, so com-

posed and almost rigid was her attitude; but beside the other two ladies her actual youth asserted itself, she was undeniably so much younger. She might have been about six-and-twenty.

There was little conversation going on in the carriage, but much external observation. No one passed without being accurately scrutinised from head to foot. The "Signorina," as she was called, looked on with a more languid interest, but a little smile came to her lips as she recognised Rosa and Cecca.

When the ladies, after taking a turn on the Lung' Arno, reached home, Rosa was waiting for the Signorina in her own room.

"What a beautiful day!" said Rosa; "and how beautiful the Passeggiata was. There was quite a Corso; there were so many carriages."

"Yes;" but the "yes" was very spiritless, as the lady, suffering rather than accepting, the assistance officiously offered to her, changed her dress, and then consigned her out-of-door costume (with all sorts of observances and minute cares which would have seemed superstitious, had it not been plain that the dress was the best one, the mantle

almost, the bonnet *quite* new) to the drawers and wardrobe.

"Where is Signora Elena?" asked Rosa.

"In the drawing-room."

"With the Priore?"

"Yes."

"You seem dull, my heart."

"Oh, no."

"So La Carolina was married last week; they are all married now. A fine wife Carolina will be, crooked, sickly, ill-tempered——"

"But she had 20,000 francesconi for her dower." Something of bitterness echoed in the quiet voice as it spoke these words.

"Who arranged the marriage?"

"The Priore."

"Humph—your turn will come next" (the young lady smiled incredulously). "Do you not think you would be happier married than single, *if* you loved your husband?"

"Of course I should love my husband," said Giustina, innocently.

Rosa gave an almost imperceptible shrug, and murmured, "Poor lamb! Would you like," she continued, in a louder tone, "to marry a rich man?"

"If Signora Elena wished it——"

"But Signora Elena might choose some one you ould not like."

"I should try to be pleased with any one she chose: why should I be so unfortunate as not to succeed?" and she drew herself up with a dignity which well became the slender figure. "But how can I hope to be married? It is impossible to find anything '*conveniente*' if one has nothing."

"*Conveniente,* if La Signora would only hear reason. Why must she insist upon a man of noble birth?"

"Because," answered the girl meekly, "my name is Bentivoglio."

"Cara Lei," said the old woman, "La Signora is not reasonable. For my part, if I were Signora Elena, and I found a man of excellent disposition, who was very rich, and who loved you, he should marry you, although he were not a Medici—if even he were a negoziante."

"A negoziante!" Giustina's eyes opened wide, as if this were a species of the human race of whom she knew nothing.

"Why not, if he could make you happy? There is a precious deal of nobility in this house;

but of what use is it? I make use of my eyes, cara; we are all equal in the eyes of God in the next world, but in this, a little money makes a great difference. Signora Elena has never had the consideration which she ought to have, for want of means, and yet she is noble enough. Per Bacco! whose name was first for the contributions for the procession of Corpus Christi at Pistoia—not the Vivàrelli, but a negoziante—ah!" and Rosa checked herself and drew a long breath.

"How is Francesca?"

"Very well. I shall ask Signora Elena to let me present Beppo to her next week."

"Is Francesca sposa?" (Anglicè, engaged to be married.)

"Yes. Beppo is doing well in his trade, and as soon as they have furnished their house they are to be married. I have put by a little dowry for Cecca."

Rosa kissed the young lady's hand, and departed.

The intimate way in which these two conversed may strike an English reader as unnatural, and the subject of their conversation would be considered absurd, if not monstrous. But in an

Italian family there can be entire intimacy between superiors and inferiors, without in the least breaking down the barriers of respect and obedience. Rosa had nursed two of Signora Elena's children. That is one of the closest ties in Italy. The wet-nurse is admitted as one of the family, and continues so long after her functions have ceased. Rosa came once a week regularly to Casa Bentivoglio, to superintend the ironing, and irregularly, whenever there was a little extra work or anything going on. Almost all Italian families have several of these supernumerary domestics, who consider themselves still attached to the service, although no longer living in the house. In Rosa's case her strong sense and shrewdness of observation gave her quite an influence in the house. Like Eleanora Galigai, her strong mind ruled the inferior ones about her. Wiser than her prototype, the influence was felt, but not openly displayed. In the two or three houses she frequented much was done, in events of family importance, owing to the words spoken in season, the suggestions, and the gossip of Siora Rosa. She was as much of a "personage" as the priest, who is always also to be found hanging

on one of these families, and her will was sometimes triumphant over his. But all her intrigues and contrivances were, in the broad sense of the word, for the good of those she served, for she had a warm heart and true womanly feelings underlying her worldly, money-loving views.

As to the subject of marriage, it is usually spoken of in that matter-of-fact unromantic way in the interior of Italian families. The question of marriage is always based on the point of view of material interests. Love is the drapery, which is added after the figure is built up. No force is ever used in compelling the inclinations of those who are to be thus matched. A girl brought up in a convent knows that marriage will follow her leaving it. A young man, whose fortune equals her own, is presented to her. She is perfectly heart-whole; why should she demur? The choice of this young man has been the occupation and business of all connected with her as the time approached for her leaving the convent; what can she object to in him? If means are to be valued in proportion as they are adapted to an end, this system is faultless. In England, girls have a pseudo-liberty; but how many marry the

younger brother *they* love, instead of the elder brother who has chosen *them!* After marriage, an Italian woman sometimes awakes to find her fairy gifts dust and ashes, but at the time everything goes on smoothly. It is discussed as openly and prosaically in the kitchen as in the parlour, in the dressing-room as in the drawing-room. The servants talk of it to each other, and the confidential ones speak of it to their masters and mistresses.

It was a standing grievance in the Casa Bentivoglio that Signorina Giustina should not yet be married, or ever likely to be so. All the friends of the family had searched far and wide, but that *rara avis,* a man who scorned marriage portions, had not yet been found; and, alas! she would soon be no longer young. Rosa had a deep-laid, mysterious project of her own, but she buried it in the depths of her own heart till the time for its execution was ripe. Meanwhile she contented herself with storming at any one who said the Signorina was never likely to be married.

CHAPTER II.

GIUSTINA BENTIVOGLIO was a distant relation of Signora Elena. Her father had married an obscure country girl, in a distant province, to which he had been sent to expiate by temporary banishment from Florence some youthful extravagance and follies. But after his marriage, he was disowned altogether. He died of *ennui*, which he called a broken heart, soon after Giustina's birth. Her mother remained in her native town, San Benedetto, and supported herself and her child till she died. It was only on her death-bed that she wrote to her husband's family on behalf of Giustina. A family council was held. The Bentivoglio family were very poor, but very proud. The child who bore their name could not be left to the charity of the village priest, who had offered, at the same time that he forwarded the

mother's letter, to take care of her. Signora Elena, the poorest but most good-natured, came forward and said that as long as she lived the orphan would have a home and a protectress. She had been as good, or rather better than her word, for she had become sincerely attached to her little *protégée.*

When Giustina went down-stairs into the drawing-room, she found, as usual, the Signora Elena seated opposite the Priore. For twenty years the Priore had spent two hours every afternoon in Casa Bentivoglio: in winter, from four to six; in summer, from six to eight. By connection he also was a Bentivoglio, and that and his skill at piquet were his only distinctions. For the rest, he was a snuffy, ignorant, well-meaning man, who liked to look (through his spectacles) at a pretty woman, and who could enjoy (with a timid fear of indigestion) a good dinner.

A round marble-topped table stood between the pair. The room had no carpet, except a small gay-coloured strip, the work of Giustina's hands, near Signora Elena. The room was bare of furniture, and destitute of the least pretence to comfort, but is proportions were noble, and on the

walls was a gem of art—a portrait of the founder of the family, Enzio, son of Frederic II., the German Emperor. He was the most beautiful hero of his day. After his defeat by the Bolognese, at the battle of Fossolta, in 1149, he was made prisoner, and sentenced to perpetual imprisonment. Lydia Vindagola, a noble Bolognese, was loved by him, and consented to share his prison. To the child born of this mournful wedlock, was given the name of Bentivoglio, from the fact of his father continually murmuring over him as he took him, when an infant, in his arms, "Ben ti voglio, Ben ti voglio"—at least such is the tradition. The picture was painted with a transparency of colour which made it quite luminous in that dark, bare room. The auburn hair, the delicate features, the sad, yet piercing eyes, literally lived on the canvas; while on the marble column, against which he leant, a carnation was twisted, with all that glow of colour and glory of beauty which we admire in the tulip in that priceless picture of Rubens containing his own portrait in the Pitti Gallery. This fervid piece of natural beauty contrasted mournfully with the melancholy expression of the human face near which it shone.

When Giustina entered, the Priore greeted her with his usual affectionate courtesy, but there was something unusual in the way he fixed his spectacled eyes upon her. He watched her slow movements as she took a chair by the window, and drew out some intricate piece of netting.

"Is she not well?" he asked in a whisper. "I have never seen her look so pale."

"Are you not well, Giustina?" asked Signora Elena, aloud.

"Quite well."

"She should take more exercise: she looks as white as her work." And then he continued, in a still lower tone, "Health is the quality to which he attaches most value; his late wife died after an illness of two years. He has a horror of illness."

Giustina looked up. She had caught the last words, and her cheeks were no longer pale, though she had no clear idea what they were talking about. Some dim consciousness was stirred within her. We grope about blindly amid the circumstances which make our fate, but suddenly sometimes the veil is lifted, and we see that we are verging on a new road, but it drops before we

can ascertain whether this road leads to hills of delight or to a miserable swamp.

Giustina dropped her head over her work again, and the priest watched her with still greater attention. He had caught the sudden flush which had revealed the real beauty of the colourless face, and was satisfied. True to his invariable habit (an Italian priest, in all the outward observances of his life, is a complete machine), as the clock struck eight he took his leave.

"Giustina," called out Signora Elena, "I have great news for you. Our good Priore, who has always taken the same interest in you, as if you were one of my own daughters, has heard of something. You are listening, Giustina?"

"Yes."

"Through a friend at Montechiara, he heard of a Count Malapieri, who is looking out for a wife. He wrote immediately, and he and I hope that we may soon congratulate you on having made an excellent marriage."

"Me!"

"I love you, Giustina; have always loved you since the day you were brought to me, such a good, quiet, little girl, only twelve years old. I

wish I could have given you a dowry out of my own savings, but every year it seems that my resources diminish, and it is impossible to curtail still further my wants. As it is, I have put together a trifle,—nay, do not kiss me,—a trifle, so that when I die, you may not be absolutely dependent as to pin-money on Giulio. You must live, if you are yet unmarried, with Giulio and Carolina."

Giustina shivered.

"But I hope you will have a home of your own soon. The Priore tells me the Count does not care for a marriage portion, or rank, or anything in his bride, but to find a good young woman whom he can marry and make the mistress of his house. He does not even care for her being very young."

"How old is he?"

"Not young, of course: he is a widower, has no children, is enormously rich," continued Signora Elena, slipping by the question of age with great rapidity. "He is one of the first persons in the province."

"Montechiara is near San Benedetto," said Giustina, in a dreamy kind of way.

"Yes, your old home. When you are married, I am sure you will have no difficulty in persuading him to come every other winter, at least, to Florence."

"When does he come?"

"Ah! that is the difficulty," said Signora Elena, somewhat awkwardly. "He cannot leave his estates till after the harvest; and yet he would wish to be married at that time, if possible. Under these circumstances, though it is an expense and an inconvenience, we thought it would be no bad thing for you to go and see your old home again, and he could meet you there."

Giustina started. The plan, though mentioned so plausibly to her, was in truth most galling and humiliating: she had little pride, but a spark of something of the Bentivoglio spirit shone in her eyes.

The Signora went on without noticing it.

"I have settled with the Priore that his sister, Signora Gaspara, will take you to San Benedetto." She paused, but Giustina was quite silent. "If you dislike the idea of this marriage, say so at once; but I think it my duty to advise you to consider well, before you refuse,—an honourable

position, a man, rich, noble, prepared to love you, —what more does a woman require?"

The old lady terminated her speech somewhat abruptly, for her memory had the bad taste to recall to her that her own marriage had united all those advantages, and even more, for her husband was young and handsome, and yet she had needed more, or wherefore that long "amicizia" with—— But we will not pry into Signora Elena's secrets.

"What dresses can you take?"

The conversation now turned into a channel in which Giustina could take her part, and the ladies soon talked most confidentially; and it was arranged that Rosa should come the next morning for certain ironings, repairs, and contrivances, which the paucity of the wardrobe made necessary.

While they were talking, the Contessa Flavia entered. She was a handsome, haughty-looking woman, verging on middle age, with an air of suppressed passion and wayward gloom in her face. She had needed much more than the marriage provided for her by Signora Elena; and being of an impatient, imperious temper, had, after two years, returned to her mother, announcing

her determination never to see her husband again. A separation was agreed to by him. The interest of her dower was assigned to her as income, and though but a pittance, in a household as economical as Signora Elena's, it was sufficient. Her life, no longer varied by marital storms, was a very monotonous one; but, at all events, it was passed in Florence, and not in her husband's estates in the wilds of the Maremma.

To an Italian woman there is a whole world of gay possibilities in the mere fact of living in Florence. It is something to live on the spot in which balls are given, even if one cannot go to them. Some of the breath of the festival can be enjoyed in the shape of the descriptions given by those who were there. Then the theatre, then the Passeggiata, and the daily gossip. It was not like the miserable vegetation which had been her fate among those horrid plains of the Maremma, with a husband not far removed in sense and intellect from the buffaloes, which were the principal part of his wealth. As brutal, as savage, as unfinished a mixture of clay and vitality as those peculiarly repulsive-looking animals, how could Flavia be expected to endure him?

When the Contessa entered, she was informed of the news.

"Count Simone? Ah!" and she could not suppress a certain inflection of pity in her voice, which made Giustina look inquiringly at her; but it passed away, and the tone in which she added, "You will be very rich, Giustina," had something of envy in it.

When Giustina went to her room that evening, her prayers before the little crucifix beside her bed were longer than usual, and there was a troubled expression in her face when she rose. The idea of resistance did not enter her head, but with the natural curiosity which was roused, was a kind of recoil. Every human being, however ignorant and ill-educated, feels, especially in any crisis of his or her life, a certain right to happiness,—a desire to adjust the actual to the ideal, and not to shut with his own hand the door to all hope.

Giustina's life was an absolutely colourless and uninteresting one. Mass in the morning, household cares during the day, and endless and elaborate embroideries and knittings and nettings in the evening, were all she knew of duty and occu-

pation. Signora Elena was kind, and easy-tempered, but her perceptions were not quick. At Giustina's age she had been married ten years, and her heart and head were full of the pleasant cares which five healthy, spirited children are sure to give. The emptiness of heart which was gnawing at the very pulses of poor unconscious Giustina, she could not have comprehended. Until *she* had married, her convent life had satisfied her; Giustina had much more amusement and variety than she had ever had, as a girl. What could she desire? But Signora Elena forgot that *she* had married at sixteen. In the early morning of life she had sate at the banquet, and been filled; Giustina was perishing from inanition at the threshold, and the afternoon of *her* life had commenced. But Signora Elena was one of those well-regulated minds who think that appetite waits for opportunity, and would have been "rimasta" (so the Italians express inordinate and paralysing surprise), could any one have told her Giustina was not happy.

In the morning Rosa came. She was told the news, of course. She congratulated the Signorina, but very briefly, and with no comment. She

finished her work with great alacrity, and was off the moment it was done. Half an hour afterwards she might have been seen seated in a small, bachelor-looking room in the fourth story of a house in Via Calzajoli, talking with even more than her usual fluency to a tall, handsome man, who was listening to her with attention, but in silence. The silence, however, might have been caused by the fact of his puffing slowly and perseveringly at a meerschaum during the whole time of Rosa's harangue.

"I cannot tell how," gabbled Rosa, "but it must be stopped. I know her so well, she would die if she were married to that Count Simone (che bestia!). I have often heard of him: one of my nephews is married to a woman from Montechiara. She knows this fine Count. He is a bad one! To think of the Priore, good innocent man, being anxious for such a marriage—but it must be stopped——"

"How?"

This monosyllable served as a dyke to the overflow of words. Rosa paused, then with eager volubility she recommenced.

"She shall not be sacrificed; I have known

her since she came, a pale little angel, to Casa Bentivoglio, and won all our hearts by her pretty ways, and since you told me you loved her, and were resolved she should be your wife—I mean since I found it out—I have resolved that it shall be so. What Rosa wills to be, she usually finds comes to be, Che sarà sarà, but the Signorina shall not marry Count Simone. You might propose at once to Signora Elena—no, that would never do, we must get rid of Count Simone first—I shall tell my niece, she is one of those gossips full of 'ciarle' and 'chiacchiere,' and it will soon get to Montechiara that Giustina is—at least her mother was—'tisica;'* Count Simone is afraid of illness."

"Till when did you say Signorina Giustina would be at San Benedetto?"

"Till Monday morning; she goes to-morrow, Saturday, and returns Monday evening."

The gentleman rose at these words, and Rosa felt she was dismissed. She rose too and kissed his hand. He laughed, and she looked at him with the loving eyes with which a foster mother looks upon the child she has nursed. The six feet of manhood, bearded and moustachioed, before

* Tisica—consumptive.

her, bore, however, very little likeness to the cooing baby she had held on her breast thirty years ago; but he was her first foster child, and she worshipped him.

The next morning the old Bentivoglio carriage, but with postilions and post-horses, rattled up to Signora Elena's door. The bells on the horses rang a merry peal as they set off. Signora Gaspara, a drowsy-looking, monastically-dressed chaperone, took her place by Giustina.

CHAPTER III.

On Monday evening they returned. When Giustina entered the drawing-room, her veil was half down and her face was not seen. It was late, and the large room was almost in the dark. The silver "lucerne" only lit a small circle in the middle. Signora Elena, who had missed her gentle companion even during those three days, welcomed her quite joyously. She bade her run and take off her bonnet.

When she was gone Signora Gaspara and Signora Elena entered into close conversation as to the results of the journey. It had been prosperous. Count Simone was pleased with the appearance of his intended.

"He said she was prettier and younger-looking than he expected."

"And he?"

"Ah, he seems an excellent man; old certainly, but handsome and very generous. He had brought a lovely pearl brooch and earrings with him as a present for Giustina, and he gave them to her with his miniature before he left. He said he would write to her, and hoped she would write to him."

"How did Giustina seem—pleased?"

"She seemed the same as usual, quiet and grave. Perhaps she was tired; I am sure I was," and the good old lady gave a prolonged yawn, which evinced that the fatigue still endured; but Signora Elena was too anxious and curious to let her sink so soon into repose.

"Did she find San Benedetto much altered?"

"Very much so."

"It must be, it is fourteen years since she was there. Did she see any one she knew?"

"No,—ah, yes. When she went to see the tablet in memory of her mother, which her old friend the priest erected before his death in the church, she told me she met his nephew."

"Ah, does he live there still?"

"No, he is a negoziante at Pistoia;" and poor Gaspara was asleep even before she heard Signora Elena's reply.

Signora Elena saw it was useless to inquire further, and, leaning back, murmured, "Poor child! how glad I am it is all settled. I am sure she deserves her good fortune."

Meanwhile the poor child had gone up-stairs and changed her dress and smoothed her hair, and then she sat down on a low seat before her table and tried to settle her thoughts.

She looked round the room which she had inhabited for fourteen years, and, strange to say, looked at it as a stranger might. She observed its smallness; she noticed the chest of drawers, the object of her admiration when she first saw them, with their quaint intarsiatura of ivory and ebony, and the huge, highly-ornamented, but barbarous key, which served as a handle to pull the drawers open, but was quite incapable of being used to lock them; the toilet table with its elaborately knitted cover and flounces (the work of her own hands), and the small silver-rimmed glass in the centre, which was her own—it had belonged to her mother; the high window which looked on a courtyard, where there was nothing but a grass-grown, disused well, and in the corner one tall dingy cypress (the sky and the top of this

cypress were the only objects she could see from her bed), the mother-of-pearl and silver crucifix which hung beside her bed, and which had also belonged to her mother. The crucifix and the little mirror were the only things in all the room that Giustina could call her own, except the two morocco trinket cases which she had laid down on the table, and which were pledges of her future, and for the first time the utter loneliness and helplessness of her lot seemed to overwhelm her. She was bound to the past by these relics belonging to the dead—to the future by these gifts, and was there not worse than death in this future? She shuddered.

Had Count Simone been merely an elderly man with grey hair and a venerable face, Giustina would have been quite satisfied; but the husband she was introduced to, was a thick, short man, whose face was lined with age, but the expression of whose piercing grey eyes belied his years. His wig and moustache and beard contrasted disagreeably by their intense blackness with those eyes. The wig was drawn so low on the forehead, by way of hiding its numerous wrinkles, that the shape of that nobler portion of the human counte-

nance was quite concealed. A head which is all face and cerebellum is not a pleasant object to look at, and though the assertion may seem paradoxical, the more ostentatiously a wig is worn, dyed beard displayed, and artificial teeth thrust on our observation, the falser is the look they give to the rest of the person. Giustina's first impression had been fear, and then dislike. Count Simone was very courteous in his manners, but beneath this veneered exterior something brutal and cynical pierced through.

We must not suppose that poor Giustina's sensations were precisely such as an English girl would have felt, could she by the remotest possibility have been placed in a similar situation. Giustina had a deep sense of the obligation of marriage *quand même*, and a leaf floating down a stream towards the brackish sea, has as little idea of resistance to its fate as she had. But there was a recoil in her natural instincts. She felt a strong agitation which made her heart beat and her temples throb every time he spoke to her, and a painful blush spread over her face, which seemed to burn with fever-heat ever since the moment he had greeted her. This unusual emotion was, how-

ever, very becoming. Count Simone had at first been displeased. He had a horror of delicate looking women. But afterwards this disagreeable suspicion was effaced. Giustina was slight, but the soundness of health was in that clear and bright complexion, and in those sparkling eyes. He was satisfied. She would do. He had not had his journey for nothing. He wished he could have married her on the spot, and have taken her back and have placed her at once at the head of his house. He could not do this. There were certain legal preliminaries to go through which demanded delay. All that he could now do was to play the agreeable while they were together.

He took the two ladies out for a drive, which occupied the whole morning, and then came the longest and most elaborate dinner Giustina had ever partaken of. Count Simone was a *bon vivant*, and had ordered it. Then the miniature and trinkets were presented, and the betrothed parted. It is premature, perhaps, to use the word "betrothed," for they would not be absolutely engaged till Count Simone had written to Signora Elena and had made arrangements with her; but it was understood on both sides that

the affair was settled, and that when they met again it would be to be married.

That night Giustina never closed her eyes. She shivered as in bodily illness. She thought she must have caught cold during the long drive, when such hot flushes came over her every time Count Simone addressed her. They were to leave very early, and while Signora Gaspara, though up and dressed, was taking advantage of the very last moments to continue her doze, Giustina went to the church to see the tablet erected to her mother. It was outside the church on the left of the porch. On it was a wreath of freshly-gathered white and red roses. She remembered it was her mother's festa Sta. Dorotea. When she knelt down in the church to say her prayer, she joined in the supplications for her friends—the unknown one who had given her this pleasure in this remembrance of her mother. When she rose, and was leaving the spot, a gentleman advanced to meet her, and evidently recognised her. There was something frank and pleasant in his face which seemed familiar to her, but she did not remember him.

"You have forgotten me, Signora Giustina?"

She acknowledged it.

"Do you not remember your old playfellow, Camillo Michelini?"

"Ah, yes,—now I do; at first I did not."

"It is natural; it is so long ago, and you were a child when you left San Benedetto; but I have never forgotten you, or the dear saint who was so good to me." He pointed to the tablet.

"Did you put those flowers there?"

"Yes, I do so every year, on this day."

"Thank you," said Giustina, with her eyes full of tears.

"I have longed to see you; it was my uncle's wish I should never lose sight of you, and through Rosa,"—the young man blushed a little,—"I have been able to know you were well, to hear about you, and from time to time I saw *you*, though you never saw *me*. I wished to make myself known to Signora Elena, but our positions are so different; besides, I only wished to become acquainted with her for your sake. . . . Wait one moment, Signorina; you know how your mother loved me?"

"Yes."

"Well, we can never be strangers, at any rate;

but if you would authorise me, I would present myself to Signora Elena, and presume to ask her permission to——"

"It is too late," said Giustina, softly. "I must go—do you know that I am to be married to Count Malapieri?"

"Count Simone!—that old——"

"Hush, you must not speak so now—it is too late. Will you promise me always to remember this day, and then I can think of you and my mother together?"

He was about to answer, but she drew her mantle round her, bowed her head, and was gone.

While Signora Gaspara continued in the carriage the doze commenced in the inn—Giustina wept bitterly.

Now, as she sate in her room, an apparition rose before her of a man with kind voice and loving eyes speaking tenderly to her, and pointing to an escape, from what seemed a terrible fate. But as she had said, it was too late.

She rose, and, with the caskets in her hand, went down stairs. She was received by Signora Elena with quite a little fuss. A comfortable arm-chair was drawn out for her. She was

treated at once as the affianced of Count Simone. The miniature was looked at in silence; the Contessa Flavia, who was present, directed a keen look of inquiry at her, and then the trinkets were lavishly praised.

Giustina passed another restless, sleepless night.

The next day was the day that Rosa was to bring Beppo to present him to Signora Elena. Beppo, brushed, shaved, and in his best clothes, looked the personification of a well-to-do artisan. Cecca, in her holiday garb, with her long ear-rings and her necklace, was as blooming and happy-looking as a girl of twenty, who is shortly to be married to the lover of her choice, usually is. They both were radiant except—so Giustina fancied—when they looked at her. If there was compassion in the glances directed towards her, there was envy in the searching look she bent on them.

Some cheap presents and a trifle of money were bestowed, and they went away looking very pleased and proud, and murmuring most cordial wishes.

"Tante cose per loro Signorie," especially for

the Signorina. "May she be as soon as happy as I am," added Cecca, with an arch smile.

Before the door had well closed on them there was a little bustle round Giustina. She had fainted away. When she recovered consciousness she looked so ill, the doctor was sent for. He ordered her to bed directly. She was in a high fever.

CHAPTER IV.

ROSA was sent for to nurse her. She came, looked very grim and malignant, but nothing could exceed her care and watchfulness. The fever ran its course, but was at last subdued. For two or three days Giustina was delirious and in great danger. Her hair had to be cut off, she was bled, she was blistered; but, strange to say, she recovered.

At this very time a letter arrived from Count Simone, from which, amid the compliments and euphuisms of Italian epistolary style, one line of meaning could be extracted. He requested a portrait of his intended bride.

"A portrait, good heavens!" exclaimed Signora Elena, "impossible! He would not recognise her."

An answer was sent, explaining the impossibi-

lity of acceding to his request, but making as light as possible of the illness.

"Illness!" was he always to be haunted by that word? Count Simone smoked long and drank deep that day, meditating on the news. Rumours had been circulated among his tenantry of his approaching marriage, and somehow, though he could not have told how, the echoes reached him back again, but coupled with the insinuation "that he had been unfortunate enough to select another consumptive wife,—*una tisica un' altra volta.*"

Count Simone became very anxious. For a fortnight he heard nothing more from Florence. At last his impatience and fear knew no bounds, and he resolved, in spite of the long expensive journey, to reassure himself or convince himself once for all. He set off a few days afterwards and called on Signora Elena the very afternoon he arrived. The effect was quite dramatic. The Signora Elena and the Priore were sitting as usual opposite each other at the marble-topped table; the Contessa was on the sofa reading a French novel; supported by pillows in an arm-chair by the window was the drooping form of

poor Giustina. Her short hair waved around her temples, and gave her quite a childish aspect, but she was paler, thinner, more fragile-looking than ever. Not even the surprise brought a tinge of colour to her cheeks. Count Simone fixed a piercing glance upon her. "Tisica, per Bacco!" * was his half-audible exclamation.

Had Signora Elena been addicted to swearing, she would have done so upon the present occasion. She commanded herself, however, and the politest greetings were exchanged. The beauty of this admirable fencing was, that both who used it understood the other perfectly. Signora Elena felt it was all over, as regarded the marriage. Count Simone stayed but a short time.

Nothing was said after he left, but when they separated for the night, Signora Elena's kiss to Giustina was perceptibly colder.

The next three or four days the moral atmosphere of Casa Bentivoglio was charged with electricity. Signora Elena was undeniably snappish and cross. On the fourth day a letter came. Count Simone wrote to beg that if the Signorina were recovered, the preparations for the *trousseau*

* "Consumptive, by Bacchus!"

might commence, and announced that he had given orders to his lawyer to prepare the settlements.

Signora Elena understood what this haste meant. The marriage was to be broken off by the lawyers. Count Simone did not choose it to be said that he retracted, because his intended had had an illness.

Signora Elena's spirits rose a little; she hoped that, through the lawyer, she might yet checkmate the recalcitrant lover. She gave orders to her man of business to be as yielding as possible. The rupture should not be attributed to the family of Bentivoglio; if determined on it, Count Simone must take all the responsibility of it himself.

But with all possible good intentions on one side, when there is a resolve on the other not to come to terms, it is difficult to conciliate separate interests. Both lawyers took quantities of snuff, and shook their heads, and used words of four syllables, and diplomatised and negotiated, but no forensic ability could master the question of how to draw up settlements, for a marriage, which one of them knew, was not to take place. The coolness with which they discussed the subject of

lineal and collateral descendants, of the rights of the eldest born, and the claims of the younger children, of this impossible union, was highly creditable to their powers of face, and proved them worthy descendants of those famous logicians who discussed so interminably and indefatigably how many angels could dance on the point of a needle. But their labours were cut short in an unexpected manner.

CHAPTER V.

GIUSTINA, before whom the pros and cons were often discussed, in the visits Signora Elena's lawyer paid his client, had listened languidly and hopelessly, not understanding in the least the drift of all these complications, but rejoicing at anything which deferred the marriage, until Rosa, one day, took it upon herself to enlighten her. She told her that Count Simone's repugnance to the idea of marriage with a woman who appeared of such frail constitution was such that nothing whatever would bring the affair to a termination, unless indeed that as months passed by, and Giustina entirely recovered her health, he might find out that he had been too hasty in his suspicions, and confess his error by carrying out his first intention. For the second time in her life there looked out of the girl's gentle eyes a spark of ancestral

pride. She had resigned herself to accept him as a mournful necessity, but to be cast aside and then taken back, in consequence of some inhuman whim, was more than she could submit to.

She paused for a while to gather strength, and then went straight to Signora Elena, and with much hesitation—a cheek as white as death, but a manner as inexorable as fate—declared *her* invincible repugnance to the marriage, and, what was more, her resolution *never* to marry Count Simone.

The Priore and Signora Elena were aghast. Was this the gentle Giustina, hitherto so submissive and obedient in all things?

"What will you do, then?" asked Signora Elena, in a cold incisive voice, as unlike her own as possible.

Giustina burst into tears. The Priore drew the old lady aside and talked to her for a while. Since he had himself seen Count Simone he had repented having proposed the marriage. In theory, and at a distance, the idea of a Countess Malapieri of great wealth, and in a fine position, was delusive; but when the reality had appeared in the

shape of the person, through whom these advantages were to be gained, he was man enough to pity Giustina, and to regret his own part in it. The world had nothing ostensible of which to accuse Connt. Simone; he was neither a prodigal nor a miser; he was honourable in his dealings with men. How was it that his name was always pronounced with dislike, and that his presence invariably inspired fear?

Character is a photograph which is taken off unawares, but of scrupulous fidelity always, and of which copies are to be found everywhere.

The Priore made Signora Elena comprehend that it was more dignified for the affair to end thus than through the lawyers. End it would, unquestionably; it might now be put upon the Signorina's delicate health, and no harm would be done.

At last Signora Elena consented to hear reason and to comply with Giustina's wish. She loved her so dearly that she was perhaps all the kinder to her, after this first ebullition of annoyance was over. It was, however, a very great disappointment to her. She felt she had failed in the principal duty of a protectress, if Giustina re-

mained unmarried; but what hope was there of another bridegroom?

Rosa, who came in and out of the house as usual, gossiping, and ironing, and stitching, soon heard that the marriage was off. She was delighted, and went about with sparkling eyes and yet more active tongue. She devoted herself to Signora Elena, and they discussed, day after day, the probably melancholy state of future singleness of poor Giustina.

In Italy they do not pretend to call celibacy single *blessedness.* That is an irony or a reproach peculiarly our own.

It was now that Rosa began to put in the wedge which was to force open the Bentivoglio prejudices. She was always deploring over "*la poveretta,*" as she called her. What *would* become of her? If Signora Elena died—which God forbid—Giustina must live with Signor Giulio and his wife. Giulio was his mother's son, that was enough; but La Carolina was envious, jealous,—every one knew what *she* was . . .

She flew to her foster son, and told him that he could now come forward. Signor Michelini called on the Priore—had a long conversation with him,

which ended in quite converting him to his side of the question, and then entrusted to him a long letter to Signora Elena, in which he made formal proposals for the hand of her *protégée.*

He had spoken to the Priore of his long and faithful attachment, dating from Giustina's childhood; but to the old lady he dwelt more on the prudential and ambitious considerations that had made him presume to desire an alliance with one of her family. His fortune was considerable, and increasing daily. The transactions which it led him into, brought him into contact with persons of a position far superior to his own. His wife would assist him in receiving such persons, and he sought one who would be able fittingly to represent the present position of the family Michelini. As to dower, he was perfectly indifferent.

Signora Elena was at first shocked—"a negoziante"—he must be mad. Literally, Signor Michelini was a wholesale merchant of corn and grain; but Pistoia was far enough to allow a pleasant cloud to float over the realities of the case. The disappointment about Count Simone made her, however, less impracticable than she

would have been under the circumstances. But she was bewildered.

She spoke to her daughter, of whose understanding she had a high opinion.

"Is it not impossible?" she asked, when she had concluded her appeal.

"Let me think about it," answered Contessa Flavia, indifferently.

Rosa was in the room at the moment, and resolved to speak herself to the Countess. She spoke less to her usually than to any one else in the house, for Flavia was always silent, self-absorbed, and moody; but the shrewd old woman had observed her, and soon fathomed her heart history.

She made a pretext, and followed her to her own room. She told her the love part of the proposal. The attachment felt in earliest childhood by the clever, precocious lad for his little girl companion; the fidelity with which he had cherished it; and how passionately, and, till now, how hopelessly he had aspired to win her for his bride. Flavia's haughty, cold face softened, and an indescribable look of yearning dilated her eyes. In her dreary existence, such a tale had

the effect of a sudden breath of south wind on an ice-bound alp. The snow melted, and revealed there were flowers to be found even there.

That evening, after Giustina was in bed, she heard a rap at the door. She jumped up, fearing Signora Elena was ill; but the Countess Flavia entered and reassured her, bade her be quiet, and sat down beside her. She said that she had not felt well or inclined to sleep this warm summer night, and had come to beguile an hour or two with her. She was, of course, silent as to the proposal of Signor Michelini. She began talking about herself, her own history, her convent life, the few weeks at home preceding her marriage; the marriage itself. Briefly, freely spoken, there was enough in the record of such a wasted life, such an empty heart to impress itself forcibly on Giustina's tenderer, softer nature.

"I tell you all this," said Flavia, "to bid you beware. I would not interfere when the marriage between you and Count Simone was talked of; it seemed like treachery to my mother who had set her heart upon it to dissuade you from it, and I thought it possible you might be happy, even under such circumstances, for I knew what a

good, simple child you are; but now you are free again, I entreat you, do not be persuaded to marry any one you do not know, or knowing, cannot love. Better death than such a marriage as mine; yet my husband is rich, noble,—of lineage nobler even than ours; but a *facchino* who had loved me had made me happier."

When she left, her very lips were pale with the emotion with which she spoke. The Contessa Flavia advised her mother the next day to see Signor Michelini herself, and if she liked his appearance and manners, to make no objection to his proposals.

Signora Elena consented to do so. The interview had a great effect. Her womanly heart was touched by the beauty and generosity of this plebeian lover. He was so respectfully aware of the enormity of the sacrifice that he asked when he proposed for a Bentivoglio to become a Michelini, his manners were so really good, his words had a tone which brought back such thrilling reminiscences of her own youth when she too was loved, that she was at first puzzled, then pleased, finally convinced.

A few days afterwards, in the gravest manner

she presented the following alternative to Giustina. On the one hand she offered, if she continued single and lived with her, to manage in such a manner that at her (Signora Elena's) death, she should have enough money to enter a convent, and not be dependent on Giulio and Carolina; on the other, she told her of this new proposal of Signor Michelini.

"You know him; he lived in your neighbourhood, I think." Giustina's lips parted with an arch smile, but Signora Elena did not see well, and did not notice it. "Which shall it be?"

"Will you let me answer after I have seen Signor Michelini two or three times?"

Signora Elena cast up her eyes in amazement. What was the world coming to? but she supposed that the low birth and nameless origin of Giustina's mother would explain this want of "*giudizio*" (good sense or judgment) in her *protégée*.

About three months afterwards Giustina and Camillo Michelini were married. It was a very quiet marriage, and took place at San Benedetto, in the church where the tablet to her mother was placed. No one was present but Signora Elena, the Priore, and Signora Gaspara. It was under-

stood by all that this marriage broke off all tie with the family of Bentivoglio. But a breath of strong vivifying life had been stirred in Giustina's heart, and she was indifferent to this. The sweet sunshine of love and hope had expanded her intelligence, her mental and physical health. She was no longer a drooping, fading, sickly girl, but a woman lovely and beloved, and best and most life-inspiring of all, she loved with every faculty of her nature.

Two years after this marriage, on Ascension Day, 1861, Rosa stood again under the trees of the Cascine. Beppo, who had the sober look of a married man, stood beside her, with his eternal cigar in his mouth, keeping time by its regular whiffs to the pauses of Rosa's floods of eloquence. This time she was talking politics, and of the great change in Florence during the last two years.

"You see," she said, "giving the people a voice in the choice of their government is like putting new blood into an old man's veins. All goes on in the same way, but with fresh life. They are as proud of obeying the laws, which they make themselves, as I am when I wear a dress, even if

it be a tight fit, which I have stitched myself. I never can bear a dress which a '*sarta*' has made; I never rest till I undo it and re-make it after my own fashion. There they are!" she suddenly called out.

The same old barouche, with its apoplectic coachman and aged horses lumbered along the drive, but the party inside the carriage was a different one—Signora Elena, to be sure, was unaltered; but she was speaking to a fair bright-looking woman, beautifully dressed, in whom, but for her soft eyes, no one could have recognised Giustina. Opposite her was Francesca, very portly, very smart, dressed, as a *balia* or wet-nurse, and in her arms a rosy baby was fast asleep.

"How well she looks!" said Beppo, pointing to Giustina.

"I wonder how she would have looked had she married Count Simone. Well, I may take credit to myself . . . . "

"You?" ejaculated Beppo.

"Never mind," said Rosa, laughing and looking mysterious, "but, you see, though Count Simone was very rich, she could never have loved him.

Her husband is rich, too, but *he* is so good that she can love him, and we women are poor creatures, we can do without anything but love—men are different; all is fish that comes to their net; but women must love or their blood turns to vinegar, —Ask Francesca."

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